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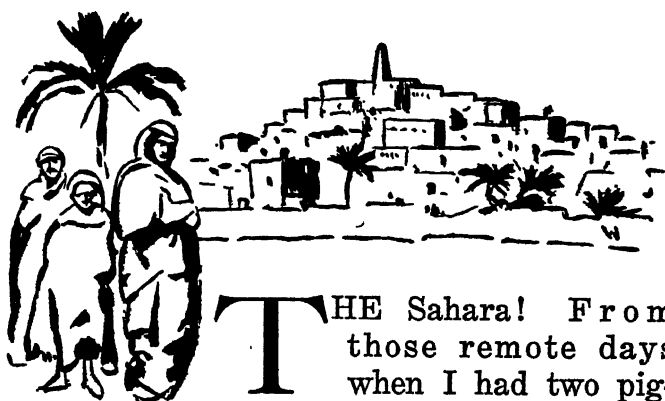
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A RED CARPET
ON THE SAHARA

*“Whatever good befalleth thee, O man,
it is from God; and whatever evil befalleth
thee it is from thyself.”*

AL KORAN.

A RED CARPET
ON THE SAHARA



THE Sahara! From those remote days when I had two pig-tails down my back and learned facts out of geographies she has been alluring; there seemed to be hardly any facts to learn about her, a fact in itself which no doubt helped incline me toward her. She was always bright and golden, and those things called oases were emeralds that she wore either as a girdle around her waist or strung in a necklace for her throat. You traveled between the emeralds on camels, and a camel had a kind of pouch under its neck where it stored enough water to go a week without drinking!

There was no reason why Charlotte and I should choose Algeria to ride camels in, except that many ships land at Algiers. And

from Algiers you go easily to the Sahara, "immense steppe, désolée et stérile," separated from the sea by the high plateaus and snowy summits of the Atlas Mountains. El Kantara is the gateway and Biskra the first emerald. Biskra is where you go easily "to see the desert" if you are a tourist and travel with Thomas Cook and Son or the Cie. Gle. Transatlantique. If you are a proper tourist—it is an art to be one, for it means being able to fix your errant attention where you are directed to fix it at the moment when you are so directed—they will take you in an automobile and thoroughly show you all Northern Algeria, the new orderly French towns, the old disorderly Arab towns, a glimpse of the Sahara, and every Roman ruin.

But from the first our attention was steadily fixed upon emeralds and camels. No one must hope that if he reads on he will discover where the ruins are, but neither need he fear lest the French and Roman conquests will be compared and silhouetted upon the antiquity and unchangeableness of the Arab—he need not fear it much, that is, though something of the sort is inevitable. Certainly the Arab is antique and changeless. Certainly France is modern, and Rome was modern once. The contrast between the

new and the old is always with you, the new conspicuous along the coast, and then as you motor inland over the high plateaus becoming ever less so, the new submerged in the old. You drive in a swift French car, the last word in modernity, on macadam roads like threads stretched over an undeveloped country, sojourning in French towns which are only French forts and seeing native towns as native as they were before the Romans came. You stop for shepherds in flowing white garments to get their flocks off the highway, you swerve to pass Ali Baba and the forty thieves in burnouses and turbans, riding mules with immense red tapestry saddles, you pass groups of women loaded barbarically with silver and coral jewelry and carrying water-jars on their heads or babies on their hips, you meet caravans of asses and mules and even slow-stepping camels, you pass the black tents of nomad encampments. More and more it is borne in upon you that the Arab is as he was in the beginning.

He matches the "immense steppe, désolée et stérile," which has remained unchanged for a million years. We came to it through a narrow gorge between high walls of rock, suddenly, after days of driving across a high, cold, grey, rainy land. El Kantara is a true

gateway, a rocky door across whose threshold lies the boundless brightness of the sun-washed desert.

"Arrêtez!" we cried to the chauffeur.

The car slowed to a standstill. The foothills fell abruptly, a broken, harsh brightness melting into a pink, bright expanse. Yellow was brightly mixed in and the distance seemed full of bright mist. The level distance drew away from the harsh, bright foreground in vague, shining violet and blue.

Then we descended, a long descent, hour after hour, while the desert gradually flattened. Behind us the foothills melted together into a splendid wall of rock, the northern wall of the Sahara, a brilliant rose-color; before us on the immense expanse lay the dark spot of Biskra, the first emerald. Beyond that a blue lake reached to the horizon.

I regarded this lake for some time. Then I marshalled my French into a suitable question.

"Lake?" answered the chauffeur. "Where is a lake? Ah, non, Madame, c'est le désert."

I glanced at Charlotte. Somewhere out there, where the primitive earth met the primitive sky, we proposed to pitch tents. Of course, for how can you ride a camel satisfactorily and find out if it is true about the pouch

under its neck unless you pitch tents? Just how we were to pitch them, just where, were as vague as that lake which was not a lake. Vagueness is alluring and interesting, but there are moments when it briefly loses its charm. Was Charlotte thinking of tents? I could not discover because already she had wrapped her head in layers and layers of veil, a habit she has on deserts. We had been on deserts before, enough to have habits on them. We had even pitched tents on them. We had rather liked them.

I liked this one. It was a little larger than any that I had hitherto encountered, it looked larger and a little more just as it was in the beginning. It looked very much just as it was in the beginning. The thread of road we were following seemed not to disturb this appearance at all. Not a living thing was in sight, but my mind dwelt upon the Arab, so primitively picturesque from the safe macadam of France. What was he like in the primitive "immense steppe"? There were the alarming sheiks of the movies who murder you or put you in their harems. The flesh and blood camel, not a picture-book camel, was monstrous and improbable. I wondered how God had thought of such a beast.

But we found that arranging to pitch tents on "le désert" was a simple matter. It merely required faith. Both Mr. Cook and the Cie. Gle. Transatlantique, familiarly known as Transa, were eager to help us when they found that they could not beguile us with more automobiles, and the Colonial French Government, which we had consulted at Algiers, acquiesced benignly. These friends, there were almost too many of them, had instructed us to seek out one Messeoud Ben Akli at Biskra.

He was a small man in Turkish trousers, a chocolate-colored, embroidered vest and an immense turban. He entertained us in Transa's office, hung with rugs and made to look as oriental as possible, and showed us a scrapbook wherein were pasted the testimonials of his former patrons. He insisted that we read the scrapbook through, an operation requiring two visits from which we emerged convinced that sailing into that changeling sea with a caravan provided by him would be happiness. None of his patrons had undertaken quite the voyage that we contemplated, but he beamed upon us with such Arab courtesy that we felt this to be entirely due to the limitations of the patrons themselves. His every gesture bespoke pride in us. He said

that he could send us even to Timbuctoo, but it takes four to six or eight months to cross the Sahara from north to south with camels. We could not find out exactly how long.

We had difficulty in finding out exactly about anything because Messeoud's English was almost as limited as our French. From the moment that we set eyes on him we knew that we were committed to his caravan, so the only point which we had to argue, besides the itinerary, was that we must have at least one Arab with us who spoke a bit of English. Messeoud said that it was not necessary, our French was superb, and in a week we would learn Arabic. The argument lasted through several cups of coffee, then he said that he would send for his cousin who should be chief of the caravan, and that we would love his cousin and that his cousin was the best "chief of caravan" in all Africa. We had to read another scrapbook of the cousin's testimonials.

His name was Serbouh Ramdan Ben Acène, and he was warmly praised, especially by gentlemen whom he had taken out to hunt the gazelle. The gazelle proved to be always an elusive beast. We saw beautiful purses made of its skin and bought a dagger with a gazelle-horn handle, at least so we were told, but

where the gazelle lives or how it is hunted remains a mystery. I cannot bring myself to consult the *Encyclopædia Britannica* because the gazelle melts so charmingly into the vague horizon.

We traveled on down to Touggourt, the next large emerald, seven hours on a railroad devoted chiefly to the date industry, the kind of dates which you buy in round wooden boxes with "Algérie" running around their covers. Mr. Cook and Transa could not take us to Touggourt in an automobile because it is far down in the desert where shifting sand forbids a road. Nothing exists but flats of sand or little dunes, and little dry bushes, and two or three islands of vividly green date-palms nourished by artesian wells. The railroad seems even a thinner thread than the macadam, and in Touggourt the modernity of France is confined to a single square.

An Arab town crowds around it—crooked, narrow, tunnel-like streets, sudden angles of houses, blank white walls with doors of carved, dark wood, always tightly closed. Men and boys in white turbans and white burnouses swarm out of the dark alleys into the white glare of the souk. All day long the souk is a dazzling movement. A few booths have been knocked together where yellow corn

meal and white couscous, from which the national dish is made, and ground pepper the color of brick-dust, are heaped up in baskets, and a little meat, dull purple, is displayed. Most of the sellers dispense with booths. There on the ground sit the grain merchants in a row. Vegetables raised under the date palms, whose round tops show over low white walls, are spread in the dust. Bundles of firewood are for sale, the roots of bushes grubbed up on the desert. Groups of men squatting together are making daggers, other groups are making shoes. Under arcades voluminous tailors stitch burnouses and gon-duras on sewing-machines which flash in the sun, startling hints of the encroaching new. Turbaned men squat on straw mats playing a game that looks like checkers, or they drink coffee, or they merely squat. The whole male population circulates around the merchants and the artificers and the loafers. They all talk. Bargaining is long and lusty, it takes all day to collect the ingredients of the evening couscous. The harsh language, so alien that your ears cannot separate a single syllable of it, clashes in a continuous, solid sound.

A fakir has come to town and his assistant collects a circle around him by beating a tom-tom. The assistant sits cross-legged on the

ground, and the tom-tom looks like a large sieve with a stretched goatskin instead of mesh. The circle grows dense and begins to sway in unison with the beat. The fakir leaps wildly from side to side, he talks and shouts, he sticks wooden skewers through his tongue, swallows lizards and swords, and charms snakes.

A group of women, members of the tribe of Ouled Nails which sends its girls to the towns to earn their dowries as dancers in the cafés—after which they go home loaded with jewelry, visible wealth, and marry among their own people—arrives upon camels. They ride in palanquins made of willow bent from side to side like the tops of prairie schooners, only these are covered with red shawls and sway back and forth with the steps of the camels. On either side hang baskets containing the household goods. The girls, with spangled scarfs over their heads, look out between red curtains.

Other Ouled Nails are walking the souk. They are dressed in gay colors, bright spots among the white-garbed men. They wear gold hoops in their ears, and bracelets and necklaces of gold and silver. They are the only women unveiled, almost the only women, for respectability hardly ever comes into the

souk. It slinks along the white walls, shrinking against the dark doors to let you pass, swathed, head and all, in white shawls, nothing alive showing except one dark eye that glitters.

On Fridays, the Mohammedan holy day, the bargaining is longer and lustier. Caravans of camels come in from the desert stretching around Touggourt, the camels walking with long, strong, stately steps and a strong swaying of huge, shaggy heads as though they could walk a thousand miles without stopping. They kneel promiscuously in the promiscuous souk. They stretch their heads toward you on long, grotesque necks, their soft lips curling back from yellow teeth. You recoil from the villainous grin and bump against a furry ass with comical, drooping ears. Two little girls with faces like coffee beans, carrying something in baskets on their heads, stop to stare. A blind beggar in grey tatters, he looks like a rag mop that has seen hard service, feels his way past with a stick. You cannot give him as much room as you would like to because of a personage, very wide, darkly bearded, wearing three burnouses. He swims importantly by, probably a Jew. A lean youth in a red fez smiles at you amiably.

In the bewildering midst of it we met Ramdan Ben Acéne and instantly felt ourselves under a benign protection. As Messeoud had prophesied, we loved him at once, especially for the picturesqueness of his thin stream of English. It was voluble in repetition, giving the impression of quite a mastery and gradually resolving itself into a hundred words or so upon which he improvised variations. He took possession of us. We were his.

He began the regulation of our lives at once by inviting us to see the Ouled Nails dance that night. Mr. Cook and Transa advertise them as one of the attractions of Biskra, but we had omitted them there with the perversity which makes us poor tourists. Now we felt helpless. We accepted politely.

Ramdan came for us after dinner at Transa's small but excellent hotel and conducted us out of the lighted square into a black alley dignified by the name of street. We stumbled blindly after his swinging burnous. Occasional dim white figures crowded against the walls to let us pass. They looked like nomads. The nomads who stood about in the souk wore little daggers on cords around their necks.

After an age the black alley led into a small

open space where stood a low white building. Light streamed from its open door, whence also issued a deafening noise. Noise assaluted us as we entered the long, narrow room, the only impression was noise. The source of it was a platform at the far end upon which an Arab sat cross-legged vigorously beating a tom-tom while a tall individual in many draperies pranced around him blowing into a pipe that had a high, raw, skirling sound worse than a Scotch bagpipe. The two of them, whose efforts seemed to have no connection with each other, concentrated all their energies, and they were both big men, on utterly wrecking our nerves. Ramadan steered us, we were incapable of steering ourselves, to a table and ordered coffee. Mercifully it came soon, thick and sweetened.

The room was plastered white with stone benches along the sides on which sat two rows of Arab men drinking coffee. Their faces expressed no interest in anything, you would never have thought that you were in a house of pleasure, and they seemed to be entirely inured to the racket. Between the two stolid rows the Ouled Nails paraded in groups. They wore long calico dresses gathered at the waist and neck, and long sleeves gathered at the wrists with ruffles falling over their

hands. Their heads were covered with red or blue or yellow scarfs under which their black hair gleamed and the shine of their earrings came and went. Some of them were beautiful. From time to time one of them would begin to dance with the strange jerking of the stomach, hips and shoulders which seems to be the only African idea of dancing, varied sometimes by what is called the dance of the hands, a rather fascinating undulation of the arms and hands.

The dancing was singularly spiritless and endlessly the same. The dancers seemed to take no more interest in it than the stolid spectators, a surprising thing, for the music, after you survived the first shock, was an exciting clamor. It was monotonous excitement, if you can imagine that. Nothing can be more monotonous than the beating of the tom-tom, a measured, deep throb which pervades all the variations the performer may improvise, and the pipe also dealt in monotonous repetitions. We had a prevision of that level sand spreading around Touggourt which we were to traverse and which would be always the same. This monotonous music and this monotonous dance had grown out of it so it must be always the same, yet exciting, an undercurrent of excitement—and yes, we

realized that we expected the Sahara to be exactly like that, as ugly sometimes as this dance, monotonous, and exciting.

But no excitement was apparent in these dancing women and these men who watched them. Was monotony so deep in their blood that they found pleasure in sinking deeper into it until they were hypnotized by it? Or was their pleasure in an excitement which they hid under stolidity because they felt excitement hidden under the sameness of the desert? The utter lack of any lilt or joy combined with the ugliness of the dance made the scene at last unspeakably depressing, made it sordid, made it obvious and yet not obvious because of this excitement like a secret gnawing on the nerves; not obvious and therefore sinister, an ugly and sinister expression of that level blue sea which we had expected to like. The Arab enjoying himself became terrifying.

We looked at Ramdan, calmly drinking coffee and staring at the floor. He seemed to be sunk in himself. Was he hypnotized too? We hoped not. He had on Turkish trousers of dark blue cloth, a brown vest like Mes-seoud's, much embroidered and trimmed with braid buttons, yellow Arab shoes, pointed and ornamented with red strips, a white turban

wound voluminously around his head and a white woolen burnous dignifying him with its ample and beautiful folds. The dress of the Arab man is truly the most dignified on earth, it is hard not to be handsome in it, which probably accounts for the inevitable question of European women in North Africa:

“Did you ever see so many handsome men?”

The town Arab often has a round, smooth face the color of *café au lait*, but Ramdan's was lean and lined and chocolate-colored. His eyes were brown and looked at us with sad kindness when we interrupted his meditation. He was willing to talk, reassuringly willing. We discovered that he was not a desert Arab, but a Kabyle from the Djurjura Mountains, the coast range of the Atlas, snowy peaks and steep valleys that we had come through on the way to the “immense steppe.” The Kabyles are of Berber stock and preserve enough individuality in their walled villages bending over the tops of inaccessible hills, to make them stand out among the heterogenous mixture of tribes and migrations which constitute the “indigène.” For casual travelers like ourselves all “indigènes” are Arabs. Our chauffeur had men-

tioned the rebellion of 1870 when the Kabyles arose against the French and he had spoken of them with respect. Ramdan was obviously proud of his origin, and we sought to endear ourselves by praising the scenery of Kabylie and the good manners and good looks of its inhabitants. He responded with praise of America.

"You make good trip," he said. "You are American. American good for traveling. French woman, no. In one day they are tire. They say, 'Ramdan, I am sick,' they eat dinner in bed. We go back. You are American. American good for traveling."

"English women are good for traveling too," we suggested.

"They are good. Americans best," and he smiled on us slowly, possessively and caressingly. "You make good trip. Guerrara, Ghardaïa, Ouargla, El Oued, Gabes—ah! You see all thing. Nobody do it. They go to Biskra, they ride some camel, they say 'I see desert!' But you see desert. You see all thing. I show you. Nobody do it. I show you all thing."

II

ON the morrow, very early in the morning, we looked down from the security of our second-story balcony and saw Ramdan, superb in burnous and turban, mounted upon a white Arabian horse, riding across the square. He was accompanied by a coal-black man on a fuzzy white mule, who led two other mules wearing the immense, red, much stuffed, tapestry-covered saddles out of the Arabian Nights. This cortège, followed by a crowd of white-robed men and boys, stopped in front of the balcony. The two Arabs dismounted and bowed low while the crowd formed a dense ring around them, turbans and brown faces around gay saddles, the bowing figure of Ramdan and the nondescript coal-black man—he was very nondescript, he wore white cotton Turkish trousers, a brown flannel army shirt, a gray linen duster and an intensely white turban which made his black face all the blacker. We returned Ramdan's salute and then stood

looking down for a brief, hesitating moment. Now we must plunge from the safe shore of France into unknown waters. Our baggage had already been mysteriously removed on the backs of brown men. Nothing remained save to go down stairs and climb onto the red saddles.

"Ramdan is a good Arab," our host said, "but the others—" and he shrugged as only a Frenchman can.

"But you are safe with Ramdan," Madame hastened to reassure us. "He is good with all the Arabs. He can take you anywhere."

We bade them farewell and plunged over the threshold. The ring of spectators opened for us to pass and closed around us, shutting us away from France.

Ramdan hurried forward. He shook hands ceremoniously, covering us with his caressing, possessive smile. He then introduced the coal-black being as Saïd, the "cook-man." Saïd also shook hands, and we had the wit to gather that the "cook-man" was a personage to be propitiated. He was as startlingly incongruous as the American sewing-machines flashing in the souk—we perceived now that he wore Arab shoes beneath the linen duster and socks held up by Boston garters stretched over the bare spaces of his

black legs between the tops of the socks and the bottoms of his white Turkish trousers. His face had negro characteristics, a little villainous-looking, the whites of his eyes very white and the flash of his teeth when he smiled startlingly white. He spoke a dozen words of French, but we needed Ramdan as interpreter to tell him of our profound joy at the prospect of his company.

Departure was a ceremonious occasion, the hour for mutual compliments. Saïd volunteered several, through Ramdan, to which we responded as well as we could. Ramdan admired our riding suits and high boots. We had added to this costume the native turban wound tightly around our heads, the best protection from the sun and wind of the desert, and we each carried a white burnous, thinking that we could wrap ourselves in its folds and thus be less surprisingly interesting to the natives we would meet. Ramdan was unmistakably pleased with us. So was Saïd. They took the turbans and burnouses as graceful compliments to their people.

"You make good trip," Ramdan said again. "You know traveling."

He and Saïd mounted us solicitously upon the mules. They assured us that they were good mules. Ramdan looked over my six feet

of bulk and said that Nina was a strong mule, the strongest in Touggourt. I was glad to know it for Nina's sake. Then Saïd climbed upon his shaggy, white one. On each side of his immense, red saddle he carried a big pannier which we discovered later contained the lunch and could contain kodaks and any other small things that we wanted to have accessible during a day's journey. Saïd had no stirrups and draped his legs over the baskets with his feet hanging down on either side of the mule's fuzzy neck. Last of all Ramdan leapt upon the Arabian horse which cavorted beautifully, causing the burnous to swirl and the ring of turbaned spectators to fall back a little, but this was a spiritedness for exhibition purposes only. Tambor settled down at once into an unbroken walk as though he knew that Guerrara, Ghardaïa, Ouargla and so forth awaited him. The mules had no pride and indulged in no cavortings. The spectators obligingly yelled "Râh! Râh!" at them, and I think that somebody gave Nina a push.

We rode through the narrow streets of Touggourt between the white walls, everybody staring at us and most of the inhabitants following us, and out through one of the city's gates onto the pink sand. Near at hand

stood a group of tents, the property of Transa, surrounded by the usual swarm of Arabs, and a little way off seven camels crowded together, five loaded with incredibly large boxes and bales and the other two packed with flat, broad packs on the tops of which we knew that we would be expected to ride. How was it possible that we had such an outfit? We had, for the camels started from the tent as soon as we appeared, and we followed on the mules. Thirty or forty men walked with us, so we could not tell which were our own people. The crowd came along for nearly an hour, saying good-bye one by one and never failing to shake hands with Charlotte and me. We were not accustomed yet to shaking hands with all Arabs, nor had we the slightest notion what the little speeches they addressed to us meant. We had not a single word of Arabic, not even "ebkâ 'âla réir" for goodbye, a very useful phrase. Ramdan, seeing our difficulty, spurred up beside us, Tambor cavorting with another flare of spirit.

"They are my friends," he explained. "They say 'Bon voyage'."

We said "Merci," a word all Arabs understand.

When the last of the well-wishers had departed, and the walls of Touggourt were

melting into the sand and the date-palms were only a dark spot, seven men remained with us. Besides Ramdan and Saïd there was a tall individual, bearded and blue-eyed, in a brown-and-yellow-striped, woolen dress called a gondura, and a very bow-legged person, lean and dark brown, in a tattered blue army overcoat, army shoes and khaki puttees. He wore a fez on his head with a red handkerchief wound around it. There were three camelmen in white cotton gonduras and white burnouses, their brown breasts and arms bare, bare-legged and bare-footed. We had not known how many there were to be, we realized that we had known very little about the caravan and probably would continue to know very little. We could never speak to any of our men except to Ramdan, and our conversations with him were distinctly limited. The difference of language seemed an insurmountable wall, yet goodwill oozed through. The tall individual and the bow-legged person walked beside our mules, protectingly and solicitously.

For two hours more we followed the camels. On one side rose a few small dunes, on the other lay the green line of the large oasis of Temacine, one of the many oases near Tougourt. The gardens of Temacine—the town

was too far off to be visible save for a white flash on distant green which Ramdan said was the dome of the mosque—stretched out a long arm toward our route, palms sparklingly green in the sunshine, with a layer of cool, blue shade beneath them. By noon we reached the tip of the arm where the last of the palms invaded the desert and sand was blown around their trunks. Ramdan spurred up once more to ask if we cared to lunch there. We found that he always went through the form of asking us when we would start in the mornings, where we would lunch and where we would camp at night, although these things are always foreordained on deserts. The length of a day's journey is determined by the distance between the wells, the hour of starting by the length of the journey, and the lunch-place by the first bush after eleven o'clock which casts a big enough shadow to sit down in. A date-palm to lunch under is a miracle, but we did not know yet how blessed we were. We politely intimated that the spot pleased us.

We dismounted and stood a little uncertainly in the delightful shade. All the morning we had felt as though we were taking part in a movie without knowing our rôles. How did an Arab caravan serve lunch to its

patrons and what, if anything, should the patrons do about it? Saïd approached and spread on the ground a gayly colored cloth, its ends ornamented with little red and green tassels that fluttered in the light breeze. Then he brought the panniers from his mule and produced hard-boiled eggs, sardines, tuna fish, bread, dates, nuts, oranges, a bottle of spring-water and a bottle of red wine. Ramdan superintended the operation. When all was ready he smiled deprecatingly, spreading out his hands.

"You must sit down like the Arab," he said, and we grasped that this meant cross-legged on the ground. We complied hastily lest he think we scorned to be like the Arab. He continued to hover over us, hesitatingly, then broke into the smile of a sudden happy idea and hastened away to return almost at once followed by two of the camel-men carrying the immense, red saddles from our mules. They placed them at our backs for us to lean against. We smiled at the bare-legged, brown men, and Ramdan, evidently pleased with our desire to be friendly, introduced them though our ears could not catch a single syllable of their outlandish names. They shook hands, pleased too, said something incomprehensible, and the chief grandly waved them away.

"Is it enough? Is it good?" he then demanded, pointing at the food spread out on the gay cloth, and on being told that it was beyond expectation wonderful, radiated satisfaction. Then he and Saïd departed, leaving us in lonely state.

The sunlight falling through the palms was an enchantment, the air a sweet, strong nectar. As we sat in the cool shade looking out over the dazzling sand the sense of playing unknown rôles in a strange but delightful movie grew upon us. We were not acquainted with ourselves at all, we were watching ourselves play adventurous rôles, two lucky, adventurous persons, interesting, admirable, and entirely enviable. For how could just plain Charlotte and I be lunching under a date-palm on the Sahara, actually on the Sahara all bright and golden with emeralds around her neck, while seven Arabs and seven camels and three mules and a white Arabian horse, slaves out of the Arabian Nights, waited for us to get through?

But it could not last. At the end of an hour Ramdan returned and shattered us by asking if we would ride "some camel." The two with the flat, broad packs were brought. Camels look very big when you know that instantly you must get on top of one of them

and they behave fiercely when they are ordered to kneel down. The three camel-men sprang at their necks, pushing the huge beasts around in circles until they dropped to their knees and slowly settled down the rest of the way, growling fiercely all the time. Growling seems to describe the protest of the camel better than roaring or howling or bellowing though the noise they make partakes of all four, an appalling noise when you must walk calmly up to it. And their great heads are appalling when they swing them around and go through the motions of biting you. They never bite you and they always kneel down and always get up and always march steadily on. Their loud anguish is more like crying than anything else, just as futile and as inevitable as the crying of big, bad children who hate to have their faces washed.

We managed to climb onto the flat, wide packs, assisted by seven pairs of willing brown hands which also held us firmly in place while the beasts arose. It is a frightful thing to have a camel get up under you for the first time, and all the afternoon I could not enjoy myself as much as I knew that I was enjoying myself for fear that Maybrick—that is as near as I could ever get to her name—might unexpectedly kneel down. I

was sure that kneeling down must be as bad as getting up, only a reverse badness. I was too much occupied with my own emotions to inquire how Charlotte felt about her camel. Hers was almost black, not nearly as nice a one as Maybrick who was a lovely light tan, nor quite so big either, nor so shaggy.

Soon we passed two small lakes, very blue, surrounded by low sand-hills, lakes that would dry up and vanish as the spring advanced, and presently we entered a vast, sandy plain dotted over with tufts of coarse grass and little shrubs like the sagebrush of California. We met a caravan of six camels, the only living things we saw all day, packing the roots of the bushes for firewood into Tougourt. In an hour the low hills around the lakes were lost, flattened into the plain. There was no landmark to the level ring of the horizon save the dark line of the oasis of Temacine behind us, a single stroke of a soft pencil at the edge of the sky.

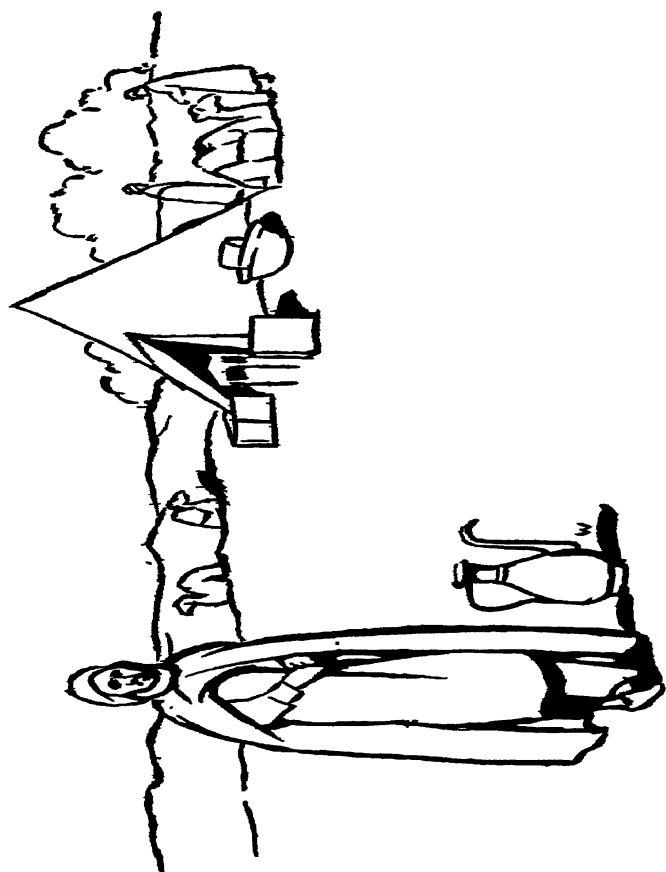
The bushes and tufts of grass were far apart, sand and stones glittered between them, but they merged for the eye into a green sea turning toward blue in the distance. It spread away endlessly without a path or a footprint to guide us. The hours of the afternoon merged together in its sameness.

Maybrick walked through them with long, slow, even steps. The motion of riding her was a long, slow, even swaying back and forth, back and forth. Her great, shaggy head swayed in front of me like the prow of a ship; she was a ship pitching through a steadily running sea.

When the sun stood about ten feet above the level horizon Ramdan rode up beside us again, Tambor with no flare of spirit left, and asked if we would camp. We looked around. Nothing was visible except endless sand and brush, and one immense bush like a variety of cedar. That bush had been a dark spot before us for the last half hour, the only distinguishable thing in the sameness, a landmark at last, the goal of the merging hours. We graciously signified our pleasure in the place.

The camels were made to kneel down, the loud anguish multiplied by seven, and we clutched at the flat packs of ours, wildly, in the fierce, deafening noise. Kneeling down was worse than getting up. When we recovered we stood around on the sand, uncertainly again, not knowing our rôles, until Ramdan spread a red carpet on the ground a short distance off and invited us to sit upon it. We accepted the invitation, we began to

suspect that we always would accept his invitations, and found ourselves with a box seat for a scene in the movie in which we need not appear, an interesting, novel, and even exciting scene, for to anyone who has watched many camps being made and made them too, mountain camps and desert camps, the speed, team work and precision of the seven Arabs was exciting. In a moment they had unloaded the seven camels who at once stopped crying and wandered off to browse on the tufts of grass. In another moment they had pitched the cook-tent and carried Saïd's boxes inside. In the third moment they had pitched our tent, a large, round one with a pole up the middle, a roomy, heavy, substantial tent. The sight of it was a pleasure to us for it looked as though it could stand up in any wind and be impervious to any amount of blowing sand. Remembering our own past struggles with tents, and how, despairing, we often did not put them up at all, we marveled at the ease with which the Arabs raised it. The slaves out of the Arabian Nights then undid the bales, producing two beds, two chairs, two tables, two lamps, two rugs, blankets, pillows, sheets. Sheets! We gasped at such luxury, but the Arabian Nights are always luxurious. In



the twinkling of an eye our house, miraculously sprung from the sand, was furnished, and Ramdan, looking like a genie, he might perfectly well be one of the genii, came, bowing, toward us.

"It is ready," he said with just pride. "Hôtel du Désert."

But we were not ready, how could we be? We invited him to sit on the red carpet.

"Where is the water?" I asked.

"Ah, here is no water—but I have water," he added quickly lest the surprise he saw on our faces might be fear. "I have always water," he spread out his hands in his habitual, deprecating gesture, "it is nothing."

We smiled at him.

"We would call it a dry camp in America," I said.

"A dry camp?"

He stumbled over the words, and I used all the resources of my French, a great strain on me, to explain them to him and how we were used to camps without water and were not afraid to travel anywhere and camp anywhere with him. He committed the new English phrase to memory with delight, saying "mlih," the first Arabic syllable our ears were able to catch.

"'Mlih'? What is that?"

"Mlih! Good. Arabic. Good."

"Everything is 'mlih'," we told him. "Our whole journey will be 'mlih'."

"In cha Allah!"

"What is that? 'In cha Allah'?"

"If Allah will. Arab say it. In cha Allah—Allah—you know—what you say?—Dieu."

"God. Allah is a name of God. We will make a good trip, 'in cha Allah'."

"Oui! Oui! You know, you learn, s'ah'h'a!"

"S'ah'h'a'?"

"À votre santé. It is greeting—good—good greeting. You do something, I like it—s'ah'h'a!"

"S'ah'h'a,' Ramdan. We like what you do. S'ah'h'a'!"

"Ah, you come alone with Arab, you are not afraid, you like, you learn—ah!"

The three of us laughed in delightful understanding on the carpet.

And while we laughed the sun suddenly vanished. There was no gorgeous warning of its departure, nor any afterglow, only a dropping of the great, bright eye below the edge of the world and afterward a gradual, pure fading of white radiance.

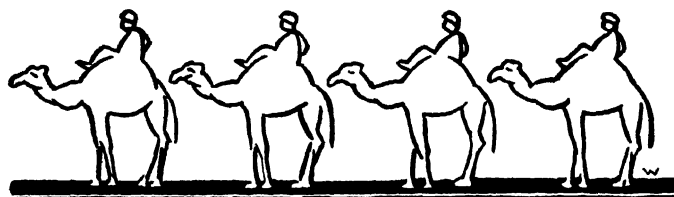
In the white dusk Ramdan left us, we were still not ready to retire even into a

house miraculously sprung from the sand, and presently we saw him some distance away behind the cook-tent in the door of which Saïd sat cross-legged cooking our dinner on an iron grid over a little fire of twigs. Ramdan washed his hands and feet and face with sand, then he spread a mat on the ground and knelt upon it facing the east. ↓ He bowed his head to the earth several times and raised it again adoringly, stood up, knelt down, stood up and knelt down, prostrating himself. ↓ Saïd's fire of twigs was a red star on the ground. It lighted his black face and his untidy turban and the dim recesses of his tent. The three camel-men had made a semicircle of boxes and sacks, a low, sheltering wall, and were starting another fire before it. The three mules and Tambor were hobbled along a rope stretched between two stakes driven into the ground, munching bundles of the coarse grass which the brown-and-yellow-striped gondura and the tattered blue overcoat brought for them. The camels, black specks in the luminous, white twilight, wandered with lowered heads, slowly, from bush to bush.

"Why need we ever worry?" asked Charlotte with a tranquillity that matched the night, an astonishing tranquillity under the

circumstances, really, the tranquillity of a red carpet spread on empty sand and of not being ourselves, being lifted out of ourselves by the strangeness of our surroundings. "We have no control over anything, have we? We are committed to the mercy of Allah."

"In cha Allah," I answered, myself feeling the influence of the carpet.



III

ALL lovers of deserts are sun-worshippers. Why the Mohammedans who live so much on deserts have the crescent moon for an emblem instead of the flaming sun, is a mystery unless it is because the moon, only reflecting the glory of the sun, is more bearable. Her elusive light is certainly easier on the eyes, more glamorous for the mind and notoriously so for the heart, than the ruthless, unescapable demonstrations of the sun. Or perhaps the star and crescent on the banners of Islam are reminiscences of pagan days before Mohammed recalled his countrymen to the true faith and Arabs worshipped the stars and planets and noticed the moon. Nevertheless the sun would be a logical emblem, historically suitable too, for some of the Arabian tribes, under the influence of Persia, were sun-worshippers, and most of them during what they call the "state of ignorance" prayed three times a day, "before sunrise"—I quote the

“Preliminary Discourse” to the translation of the Koran by George Sale, Gent.—“ordering it so that they may, just as the sun rises, finish eight adorations, each containing three prostrations; the second prayer they end at noon, when the sun begins to decline, in saying which they perform five such adorations as the former, and the same they do the third time, ending just as the sun sets.”

Whether the adorations were of the sun itself, or through the sun, of the Supreme Being in whom Arabs have always believed in spite of their pagan practices, seems to be debatable. That the idea of Allah has always been, is undebatable, and Mohammed, his prophet, only recalled the people to their allegiance, setting him firmly above all possible competition with the heavenly bodies. Even so, disentangled from the sun, Allah still has much to recommend him on deserts. He seems to have few trappings of theology, a simple deity, his ancient attributes, oneness and everlasting changelessness, his will, inevitable as fate. Could he but have forbore to speak that once through his prophet and allowed the faithful bowing toward the east on their carpets to go on adoring him in the rising sun, confusing him with it a little instead of confusing themselves with Mecca,

he would be a god very compelling to the hearts of sun-worshipping lovers of deserts.

A cherished plan of my future—for what romance has a future without a cherished plan?—is to build me an altar to the sun somewhere. It is to be of white marble, two columns and a slab across the top. On one column shall be engraved the images of beasts and trees and harvested wheat, for the sun as the passionate lover of the earth; on the other books and airplanes and plows, the artist's palette and the singer's harp, for God in the sun and God in the earth meeting to make the spirit of man. On the slab of the table, joining all together, shall be carved a name in an unknown and forever undecipherable tongue, for every devotee, black, white or brown, the name of his own one God. The ritual of this altar shall be gorgeously impossible like the deeds of the sun and be accompanied always by the pouring out of jewels of every color to flow without ceasing over the slab and drip in running fire on the ground.

But this would hardly be feasible in the rock pastures of New England. It might lay me open to a charge of eccentricity, a burden of guilt which I already bear too much of. Moreover the sunshine of the New England coast is

too pale, yes, too temperately pale to do justice to my cut emeralds and rubies and the yellow luster of my pearls. The altar will have to be on a desert where it will become the Mecca of those who like to lie wakeful on the ground all night watching the constellations cross the sky, and like to feel in their blood the excitement of that earthly unearthly running which seems to sweep through the east before dawn. Making the pilgrimage will become a cherished plan of their futures, and when they have accomplished it they will tell you, earnestly, that always before sunrise at Mecca the earth was shaken by the running of uncanny feet.

Dawn on the Sahara is an eager waiting. There are rarely any clouds in the sky, no rose-colored nor golden banners to warn you of an event, only a slowly growing, white radiance like the slowly fading radiance of evening. Why a growing whiteness after uncanny running should excite you, may have some connection with altars but you are not thinking of altars. You only think of them afterward in the sameness of the day and if you should erect one later it would be a memorial, and perhaps all altars are of this nature.

Before the radiance begins you are stirred,

as soon as the first whiteness shows you must get up, although there is no apparent reason why you should and your Arabs much prefer that you should not until they are beautifully ready to receive you. You must run to some little hummock of sand and eagerly wait though there is no reason for this either. You have a conviction that the bushes and the pale ground are eagerly waiting and you have a fraternal feeling toward them. When they begin to flush with excitement you flush likewise. You feel extraordinarily well, able to cope with the longest possible day, and you have the vaguest, rosiest hopes about something which you know cannot happen. And then, suddenly, when you do not expect it yet, because there are no flaunting banners, the sun literally leaps up over the rim of the world. He comes like an athlete, naked, young, eager for his race across the sky, ridiculously eager, as though it were a new thing which is as old as the earth.

Then the day begins and each one turns out to be exactly like the last. Each one is a monotony of light, a timelessness marked only by the slow swing of the camels' steps and the hour's rest for lunch at noon when the sun, grown to hot maturity, reaches the top of the sky.

Maybrick was a swift camel and was always far in the lead even of the mules, so it would seem to me that I and she and Bubeker in his white cotton gondura—one of the lean, brown camel-men was devoted exclusively to Maybrick—were the only beings alive in the level desolation. When I would look down at Bubeker he seemed very small and frail, but the muscles in his bare legs were knots. Often he walked with his stick crosswise behind his shoulders and his hands raised grasping the ends of it; then I would think of the shepherds of Palestine and the goatherds of Abraham because when I went to Sunday school they were pictured thus in my book. Like them Bubeker was a “nomad-man,” a true son of the desert, an uncivilized, simple being. Across the wall of the strange tongue I could only smile at him, but he would smile back always with gentle friendliness. It grieved me that I could not offer him a cigarette, an act which quickly endeared Charlotte and me to the rest of the caravan, because he was a holy man, a truly good Mohammedan who neither drank nor smoked. He was in fact a marabout, a person who knows the whole of the Koran and might be a priest, but Bubeker was a nomad and a “poor man” so he had no mosque. Gentleness was his

characteristic and when he smiled his worn face expressed beautiful patience. He was the owner of Maybrick, almost his sole possession, and he was fond of her.

All the second day we traversed the same vast plain dotted with little bushes, and the horizon was a level ring around us. Bubeker was the guide for this part of the country as he lived beyond the oasis of Lalea and could travel between it and Touggourt "by day and by night the same." Bubeker used no compass for this navigation, it could only be called navigation for there was nothing to steer by any more than there is at sea. He drove Maybrick at the head of the outfit, guided only by his sure instinct. I felt again that day as I had on the preceding one, and would on many others precisely like them, that she was a stately ship—her great bulk covered with long, tawny hair, the swinging tufted pouch under her throat and the way she carried her head in front of me like the prow of a ship, were statelinesses—breasting a green ocean.

Toward evening we crossed a small dry lake, a bare white patch not discernible until we were upon it, and entered some small sand dunes. At once an excitement was visible in the caravan which had been progressing

stolidly for the last few hours, and Charlotte and I began to look about with interest for the water because water and sand dunes are apt to be associated on deserts. We felt certain that Ramdan must expect to reach water that night—no horse of any breed we had ever heard of could go more than two days without it, indeed we had never heard of one before that could go so long—but we had not inquired. The slightest intimation of our discomfort or unhappiness, or above all, our anxiety, devastated Ramdan, and we felt that we must never ask anything which the most obscure windings of his Arab mind could possibly twist into lack of confidence. Tambor had a depressed appearance and Ramdan had been walking and leading him nearly all the afternoon. Now, however, he spurred past Maybrick down a little gully, and when I reached him he had dismounted by a small hole in the sand. He looked up at me with noticeable emotion.

“Water is here!” he cried, and then, remembering his manners, asked, as though he were my humble slave, if we should camp.

I nodded graciously, too much occupied with my thoughts to speak. Had he supposed that water might not be there? Had he thought that this insignificant-looking hole

might be filled with sand or be polluted or that Bubeker might not find it? Nothing would have been so easy, it seemed to me, as not to find it. So occupied was I with speculation that I scarcely noticed when the stately Maybrick knelt down and I dismounted with the air of one who has spent her life on camels. But I did not ask him. Why should I disturb the joy of debarkation when we were committed to Allah?

"This is Dinar," Ramdan next informed us, rubbing his hands together with satisfaction.

Dinar consisted merely of the well in a group of sharp-edged dunes. The well was about two feet in diameter and stoned inside flush with the ground. We marveled that it was not blown full of sand, even a gentle breeze would move the sand in such a place, and we dared inquire about this. Ramdan explained that the "nomad-men" who brought their goats and sheep there kept it cleaned out. We exclaimed over the waste of labor when a few boards nailed together would cover the well, and he became tense with the effort of explanation:

"Here is not like in America," he managed "In American you do all thing. Here, it is the desert."

"But why doesn't the French government take care of it?" we asked—it was cruel to ask so many questions—"Don't the French want to preserve the water?"

He raised his shoulders in a long, expressive movement and looked away from us over the dunes.

"The French do nothing for the Arab," he said slowly.

That was his one obsession, the French do nothing for the Arab, but it moved him not to anger, only to sorrow. He regretted that the French should be the will of Allah. What the French did for the Arab became a subject for debate throughout the journey, a debate usually carried on while he served our dinner in the magnificent, round tent. He would stand in the door in his white turban, his moustache curling like a brigand's and his brown eyes looking like the eyes of a faithful dog which fails to understand. We did our best, assisted by grammar and dictionary, to make him know that the French were his benefactors. It was entirely an act of international courtesy for we were totally ignorant of what the French did for the Arab beyond building schools for him. Had we been proper travelers and fit to write a book we would have read up beforehand about so

important a matter, and I would now insert a few paragraphs on the subject. I suppose I might leave a space and insert them later, perhaps it is my duty, a distressing thought which causes me to look perplexedly out of the window at my budding lilacs. I am aware of an unpleasant interruption in my contemplation of the Arab as he stood so endearingly in front of the reminiscing eye of my mind before this idea occurred to me. The world is so full of facts, there are so many facts, and the outstanding characteristic of the Arab is his disregard of them. It is a restful characteristic. The Arab is restful when he conducts you across the Sahara, and you have no curiosity about how he is being made different. That he is being made different is indubitable, for the French have influence. You need only to look at Saïd in his linen duster, his white cotton trousers, his flannel shirt, his turban and his Boston garters, to observe one aspect of it.

Our dear Arabs out of the Arabian Nights made camp with the same genie-like promptness as before, while we sat on the red carpet spread on a dune near the well. We found that when we were not riding the camels or the mules we had nothing to do but sit on that carpet—idle luxury of the Arabian

Nights—and from the first it exercised a potent influence upon us. It had tranquilized us while Saïd cooked our first dinner over the little fire of twigs and Ramdan adored Allah, it always tranquilized us, more and more as the days and nights went by, made us forget ourselves, made us spectators, tranquil spectators. The habit of meditation grew upon us even to the danger point. The delightfulness of red carpets can be such that they become temptations, they are dangerous, strangling initiative, for what is the use of doing anything when you can sit still and think so pleasurably about it?

But meditation temperately indulged in is, on the whole, beneficial. It can even lead you to facts. For instance, that idea about covering the well with boards, a thoroughly practical, American idea, how are boards to be come by on the Sahara? They would be vastly expensive. This is no great caravan route, there have been no tracks to follow, no French military route either. Then this must be a nomad well. Yes, truly! And your meditative eye looks at it with renewed interest. A nomad well! A nomad? Here they come, your three camel-men, three black men with bare breasts and legs and arms coming in flowing white garments to draw water

for your animals. The cheapest thing they have is time and muscle, and now, sympathetic leap of the meditative heart proved by observation later to be absolutely true, time and muscle are usually, are almost always, the only things they have.

So now you watch them. They unfold a collapsible basin on the ground—French influence—and begin to draw up water in a sheepskin bucket they have brought. Behind them is a dune larger than the others, large enough to be impressive, of salmon-colored sand, on one side of which the declining sun causes an indigo shadow to lie. Everything else tends to be golden and there are golden nimbuses around the white garments of the three “nomad-men.” They stoop to lower the bucket and stand to pull it up and pour the water into the basin, and every time they move their loose garments fall into beautiful, swiftly evanescent lines, and when they move quickly their burnouses swirl, so you think of Grecian friezes. The amazingness of sculptors who can arrest the flight of beauty and preserve a second of it!

Slowly the camels come to the well, a little as though they disdained it. They lower their great heads and drink daintily. They are always frugal, nourishing their great,

shaggy bodies on the little tufts of dry grass. They have companioned the nomad from the earliest times on his desert-wandering and, like him, are inured to poverty. Tambor comes down, dragging his feet, and the three mules come. Nina kicks Bichet, and Bubeker separates them with a quick movement which would delight your eyes forever could you but hold it. For nearly an hour the nomads draw water and pour it out, the indigo shadow covers the dune, the golden nimbuses fade, the camels wander off to graze, the mules are taken to the tents and hobbled. And you meditate on the ancientness of deserts and wells in deserts, and the well from which Rebecca drew water for the servant and his camels; and on the changelessness of deserts which are forever changing as beauty passes over them, and on the length of time beauty had been passing before any man could arrest an instant of her; and on how you have had enacted before you one of the oldest of scenes which had not been staged for your delectation but was true in the twentieth century; and on how the unfamiliar cadences of the song Saïd is chanting endlessly over in the cook-tent may well have survived from the youth of the world.

IV

THAT evening when Ramdan was clearing away our dinner, he had served it in great style in courses after the French manner for the cuisine was French though Saïd did not look it, he asked deprecatingly, his kind smile almost apologetic, if we would care to come out and sit for a little while by the camp fire.

"It makes pleasure," he said.

So we went out presently and looked at our camp. I must insist on "our," because that it should be ours always struck us, from the moment the seven camels started from Transa's tents outside the walls of Touggourt, as the most remarkable thing about it. Though we had been spectators on the red carpet the night before, we had not been gently invited to share in the sociability after the day's labors and so had not been fully aware of what lucky, adventurous persons we were, not known quite how interesting, admirable and enviable. We watched ourselves going

out to the Arab camp fire to "make pleasure," less acquainted with ourselves than ever.

Back of the tent, but not far—our tent was always pitched in front of the camp with the door facing away from it over the open desert, but never far off, and we learned later that besides this precaution a watch was kept all night—was the cook-tent, round, like ours, but smaller. In the door of it stood Saïd's boxes which by day were slung on either side of a camel. Between them his fire smouldered, nearly out under the iron grid. All the men had collected around a small fire of the roots of bushes in the semi-circle of sacks and boxes built by the camel-drivers. The whole seven sat cross-legged in a ring, from the center of which the flame rose straight up in the motionless air, a ring broken by a mattress covered with a red rug laid against the low wall of baggage, evidently the throne on which we were to sit. Back of the throne crouched indefinable, black objects which the firelight fitfully revealed as camels, great heads turning slowly toward us as we approached, and the glint of eyes. At one side, but very close, stood Tambor and the mules, hobbled along their rope eating the dry, hay-like grass, "dreen," which the men had collected for them.

Ramdan sprang up instantly and conducted us to the throne. He was very solicitous, and we had to assure him that the baggage was pleasant to lean against, that we were comfortable, that we were happy. He sat down beside us, smiling in his deprecating, kindly way. The six men greeted us, they could say "bon soir" and so could we, they seemed to be enchanted that we were with them but no one spoke to us further for how could he? Neither did they speak to each other, excluding us, for the Arab is invariably polite. He seems to be under no necessity to assert his equality by rudeness and manages to combine perfect service, a slave out of the Arabian Nights, with perfect friendliness. He assumes that you are as well disposed toward him as he is toward you, and what can be more equal than that?

We produced a large box of cigarettes, they said "merci" with enthusiasm, they all smoked except Bubeker. Ramdan conversed with us, a conversation consisting mainly of pauses during which the fire crackled when somebody put on another root and there was a sound of munching and chewing of cuds and deep breathing around us. The night seemed black because of the fire, which lighted only the circle of men, shining uncertainly

on a bit of the cook-tent and sometimes, dimly, on ours, and now and then, for a moment, vaguely bringing out the shapes of the resting animals.

We had learned the men's names by that time though with the same difficulty that we had in acquiring all Arabic words. Ramadan did manage later on to write the names for us but he could not transcribe words into French letters according to any known system. We could never visualize them, and it was hard for our ears to catch the syllables. We had been too shortsighted, I suppose we had not sufficiently visualized the Arabness of the Arab, or else we were too much discouraged by the strange characters in the Arabic signs on the streets and the bewildering clash of the language, to bring so much as an Arabic-French primer along.

Embarek's name was the most troublesome to learn, the Arab does queer things with consonants. Embarek was the person in the tattered, blue army coat, the heavy shoes and the red handkerchief around his head. He had now taken off his shoes and wriggled his toes comfortably in the sand. His face was thin and strong and very dark, with an impudent expression. He had served in France during the great war and was proud of it, he had no

doubts about what the French were doing for the Arab. He thought he could speak French but he was not a success. He always addressed us as "Monsieur Dame."

Next him sat Abdulla, almost black, with a decidedly Israelitish look. He was one of the camel-men and might easily have stepped out of the Old Testament. He was always in white, sometimes with a burnous and sometimes only in a white cotton gondura, a short dress like a smock. He wore a rope around his waist for a belt, and his turban, very voluminous, was wound low around his ears making him look swathed. Abdulla was very willing and a little stupid, so he was everybody's slave.

The tall individual in the brown-and-yellow-striped gondura was Sebehe—that looks easy enough when it is written but when you hear an Arab pronounce it you have no idea what it is—the camp-maker and the "femme de chambre." He always wore that gondura, it came half way down his calves, his legs were bare and he had yellow leather Arab shoes shaped like bedroom slippers with a tongue coming up the front. His turban was always dirty and looked as though it had never been unwound. I am sure that he put it on and off in a solid piece like a hat. He was a mag-

nificent creature, more than six feet tall, bearded, not very dark and with blue eyes, and he had a perfect naïveté which always made us think of an overgrown, amiable baby. One of his duties was to bring us hot water in the mornings, but we had great difficulty in getting him to bring it even after he should have formed a habit until we learned to say "ma sr'oun," hot water, and "ma bâred," cold water. Charlotte would instruct me to call "the baby," it always seemed to be my duty, and I would stick my head out of the tent and shout: "Sebehe, ma sr'oun!" In no other way could we acquire it.

The other camel-man was Larabie. He was like Abdulla save that he was intelligent, wore a wide cartridge belt instead of a rope around his waist and was always clean. Nobody else was ever clean, so we appreciated this characteristic of Larabie's. Probably he was not as clean as we thought he was but shone by contrast. He seemed to us the most shiningly white and most shiningly brown person we had ever met. He carried himself with dignity and had a gallant air as though he were setting out upon adventures.

Bubeker came next, differing from the other two camel-drivers only in the string of wooden beads he wore around his neck, a

chaplet for prayer, an emblem of his holiness. He would sit for long periods holding it in his hands, wrapped in complete quietness. He rarely said anything. Beside him sat Saïd. Saïd was always a subject for contemplation. He seemed to be as varied as his clothes. Sometimes we thought him the most villainous black-man in the world and at other times we saw a sad strength in his face which was not villainous at all. He evidently had a sardonic humor, the joy and terror of the camp. He seemed to share responsibility with Ramdan and was always treated as a person to be honored. Ramdan said that he was a good man but hard to get along with—"but he travels with me, I know him," he explained gently.

That night they were still strangers, and as we looked around the circle of dark and, to us, mysterious faces we had no idea how their separate personalities would come to us through the barrier of language. Perhaps they came to us more strongly because of it, we might not have felt them so much had we been able to meet them in the ordinary way. Perhaps the whole life of the Sahara came to us more strongly because we were always spectators, tranquil spectators, usually on a red carpet.

The throne by the camp fire was covered with a red rug, it was almost as good as the carpet. We contemplated the Sahara from it while Embarek, urged by Ramdan, played on a little wooden flute and Sebehe sang a barbaric lament. The characteristic of Sebehe's singing was a sudden poignant stop at the end of his phrases which arrested and held the attention. How he accomplished it we could never discover, it was impossible to imitate. Ramdan explained that this was the song of a woman whose only son had been killed in the war. Then Embarek and Sebehe performed antiphonally, Embarek on the flute and Sebehe repeating the cadences. This was a marriage song in which the women inside the house answered the men who were outside.

"It is nice," Ramdan said when he had finished explaining. "It is our custom."

We agreed that it was nice.

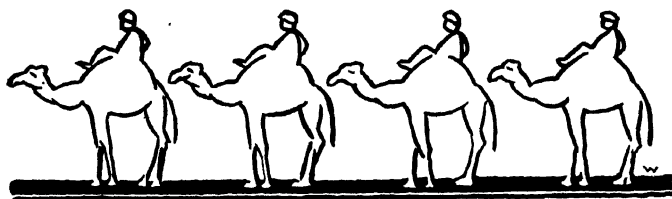
Bubeker then recited a long passage from the Koran, holding his wooden beads in his hands. They all listened with the thrilled attention of children and with a beautiful awe. Ramdan glanced at us anxiously once or twice, but we had already made him know that we were no scoffers at the wisdom of Allah. Often after that Bubeker recited the

Koran for us. Saïd also knew "some Koran," but he was not holy like Bubeker. He had a tom-tom and would beat spirited rhythms while he recited, keeping up the performance as long as we wanted him to.

None of the men, not even Ramdan, could read or write Arabic, they were in the stage of society when the singer and the story-teller were honored as they should be. Rhythmical recitations have always been one of the chief entertainments of Arabs as they are of all people who either have no written language or whose writing is in a classical dialect differing from the everyday ones. There seem to be a million variations of Arabic and few of the "indigènes" of Algeria can speak or write the pure Arabian tongue. In the souks you may see groups of men clustered intently around a story-teller or a chanter, as it was long ago. Our Arabs always took the deepest interest in each other's performances, never tiring of the monotonous singing—we could hardly even hear a rhythm unless the tom-tom kept it for us—nor of the endless recitations.

At the close of the evening we asked Ramdan if he could not sing us a song of Kabylie, for courtesy breeds courtesy and we had manners on the Sahara. He expanded with de-

light at this compliment to his country and proceeded, Saïd singing with him, to give us a traveling song with a barbaric lilt that enchanted us. Ramdan had the finest voice of all, a delight to hear, and he had not raised it once, letting his men entertain us. He always let them unless we asked him to sing, an example of the tact which made him "good with all the Arabs" and able to go anywhere. He was always pleased when we asked him, a naïve, childlike pleasure, and very often thereafter we made a special point of the traveling song of Kabylie.



V

THERE is a school of dancing which calls itself æsthetic, calmly regardless of the bitterness the arrogation of this word may cause other schools of dancing, assuming, like the art theatres, that what the heart greatly desires and mightily strives for, it shall attain. Well, it is likely to. Some groups of the bare-foot dancers insist—I think that they insist but my knowledge is as limited here as elsewhere—that all things have rhythm which can be felt and consequently can be expressed. The dancers express anything from a water lily to the wind in a hayfield, happy variations on what must be the rhythm of the earth. It is a joyous idea and daring, to translate with chiffon the snowy peaks of the Djurjuras remotely motionless in the blue sky or the everlasting sameness of the Sahara, yet if anything is thus gaily translatable these should be, for these even more than water lilies and hayfields have rhythm.

Undoubtedly, an esoteric fact, not demonstrable but thoroughly realizable. You may realize it without belonging to any school of anything—you need not dance it nor sing it though you are apt to be tormented if you cannot—a motion embedded in motionlessness, the vitality of deserts and high mountains alive in the chiffon of the air. In rare moments, especially if fortune is so good as to give you a Maybrick, you may feel the deep pulse like a beating heart that stirs you as unreasonably as running feet before dawn.

The huge, hump-backed camel is an expression of the desert. It seems to have come out of her, to be made of her dust for a manifestation of her, and when you yield yourself to its swaying step you become one with it and are a manifestation too.

It annoyed me extremely when Maybrick would interrupt my yielding to eat a bush. There was one with small white flowers along its stems called "retum," so Ramdan said, which she particularly loved. If she paused very often I would look around sternly for Bubeker, only to see him following at some distance with his wooden beads in his hands. He would walk then with a beatific expression on his lifted face, and I would sigh and try to objurgate Maybrick myself, sympathetically

unwilling to break in upon the rhythm of Allah.

In those moments when Maybrick was the Sahara and I was Maybrick, and she didn't eat the bushes, I touched a height of happiness. It was compounded of sun and wind and a bright horizon to be traveled toward without ever reaching. My mind, if I could be said to have one, was a kaleidoscope of cities and railroads and ice-fields and forests and ships throwing spray from their bows, for I seemed to possess the whole world in the sphere of myself. I longed neither for cities nor forests, completely delighted to be swaying on the pinnacle of Maybrick with the heartbeat of the sand. I felt omniscient, but I cannot remember the particulars of the amazing assurances I had, any more than I can tell five minutes after waking what I dreamed last night.

"What could the heart desire more than this?" I shouted at Charlotte once when she chanced to ride near enough to shout at on the day we went to Lalea. But unhappily it was not one of her rare moments. I think her neck ached because riding a camel does make your neck ache. I never knew which were Charlotte's rare moments because she had a way of dragging her burnous tightly

around her to keep out the wind and pulling a fold of her turban over her face to keep her nose from peeling. It made her look like a mummy.

But I did truly believe in that happiness.

The day we went to Lalea was brilliant with sunlight. There was hardly any wind, so the air, even far off, was not filmed with sand, and each bush was a mass of innumerable bright glints. The sand was shining too, saffron-colored with violet shadows, but there were no shadows in the hollow where we lunched. The sun looked straight at us from the middle of the sky. All morning it had been looking down with growing intensity at an unbroken plain, now we could see a line of low, rose-tinted bluffs on the edge of the horizon. At their base, Ramdan told us, lay Lalea in "biggen dunes."

"Ramdan," I said, "say big dunes."

"Ah, yes, big dunes!" he smiled appreciatively. "I teach you Arabic, you teach me English, good!—But not like Tribat. Ah, there biggen dunes like houses, I show you. Nò better if you go to Timbuctoo. Desert all same. Will you ride some camel or some mule?"

We signified our desire to ride "some camel." Saïd packed the remains of the

lunch in his panniers and gathered up the gay cloth with the little red and green tassels. The three camel-men, their gonduras so white in the blazing sun that they hurt our eyes, brought the protesting manifestations. We resumed the slow swaying march—only now there were those pink bluffs to wonder about and to achieve.

Curious, isn't it, that as soon as you see something to achieve, shortly you begin to long for it, and as soon as you long for anything other than what you have, the delights of rhythm are no more? They constitute an ambitionless, blissful "now." I stop writing and wonder if the oaks I see on my hillside in their thin, spring green long to have their leaves full-blown. I hope not. They are lovely enough to be contented, but no doubt they are impatient for the rich shadows they soon will cast and don't care a rap about swinging in the wind to-day. No doubt they think that when they see those shadows they will be satisfied and not long for scarlet October.

I began to long to get to Lalea.

Longing to be somewhere else very likely is what makes anybody do anything. Very likely it is a law of nature and the whole earth longs, the stars too, and the athletic sun. It

is pleasant to think of the sun achieving, but pleasant too to think of him peacefully going toward a foreordained future. That thought would please Allah and the predestination Presbyterians. The Presbyterians, though, never seem to be helped by it, they fail to add the doctrine of happiness here below, inclining rather to the life-as-a-burden theory. Happiness indeed, mere happiness as an end in itself, is in disrepute, yet why, if all things are foreordained, shouldn't you enjoy them? You shouldn't, and that is progress.

Progressing toward the pink bluffs, with the sun watching me in that uncompromising way, got on my nerves and made my neck ache. The hours refused to merge at all, each insisting on its full quota of minutes and seconds. Not until at least two of them had passed did the landscape change a particle. But change and progress are not at all the same thing, change without progress can be delightfully rhythmical but progress without change is effort without alleviations. Somebody wrote a book to prove that there is no such thing as human progress, several people have, I think, but it is an unpopular notion. Nobody wants to believe in a past golden age of the world, yet when you think of all the typewriters in all the tall office buildings!—

When the landscape changed, a dark spot, said to be date-palms, appeared in the middle of the pink bluffs. It was not much of a change, not enough in itself to help the pain in my neck, but about that time we came to an immense dry lake caked with alkali and salt, called a chott on the Sahara. We first saw one arm of it far off on the right, blue like a river with all the shrubs reflected in it upside down. Ramdan spurred up to Maybrick.

"You see the mirage," he cried, pointing enthusiastically. "I show you all thing."

In my state of progressing I wanted to tell him that the mirage was in no way remarkable, I had seen better in California, but as soon as I began to say so I found that I could not make him wretched. I expressed wondering awe instead, and soon began to feel it. The mirage became more and more wonderful, larger, and the desert beyond seemed to rise into hills reflected in a river of heavenly blue. The river itself kept getting larger, it seemed tremendous, it glistened with the bright unearthliness by which you learn to distinguish mirage. It was brighter, fairer far than the pink bluffs with the dark spot of Lalea, and made me forget to progress.

The great arm of the chott curved around

toward our route until we crossed one end of the main body of the lake, an immense white expanse, shining, streaked with blue here and there like lagoons of real water, all blue under the opposite shore where the hills arose—but they were not hills.

“Just same as here,” Ramdan said, “desert just same.” And he rubbed his hands together with the satisfaction of a showman exhibiting choice wares to appreciative clients.

Opposite us, but miles away, the unearthly-bright water flowed through an opening in the seeming hills with a promontory on either side. It was a radiant gate, a gate through which ships with gold and crimson sails might sail, and sail on into the sky, and sail and sail without casting anchor to the very shore of the sun.

The end of the chott which we crossed was covered with little mounds of white salt-crystals and tussocks of dry grass. Maybrick threaded her way among them on paths beaten hard by camels’ feet and the feet of their bare-footed drivers, for we were coming near to Lalea. The line of bluffs was lost for a while behind the “biggen dunes,” hills and valleys of salmon-colored sand. When we topped a hill, rounded sometimes and sometimes with a precipitous knife-edge crest, we

saw the bluffs with unmistakable palms at their base, only to lose them again in shallow, winding valleys into which we plunged in swirls of sand. The animals seemed to slide down the dunes, the mules sinking over their knees at each step and the sand glissading down after them. The camels did better with their great padded feet, but it was terrifying when Maybrick headed precipitously downward and her back became a toboggan slide. I bore it until she came to a sharp ridge which fell straight down before her some fifty feet. It looked absolutely impossible and, besides, she hesitated. She walked along the top toward a worse-looking place, hesitated again and turned back, balancing precariously.

"Bubeker," I yelled, "brek djeumel! Bubeker! Instantly! Stop praying. Brek djeumel! Brek!"

Of course he understood nothing except "brek djeumel," make the camel kneel down, imperative mood, I hoped. I intended it to be. Very likely he didn't even understand that for it lacked the forceful Arabian consonants, but he grasped calamity and came running, the first time I ever saw him run. So did Embarek, and Sebehe who flung himself off my mule, and Ramdan who spurred Tambor to a gallop through showers of sand.

Maybrick turned round and round on the precarious edge of the precipice preferring anything rather than to "brek" until Embarek flung himself on his stomach across her neck. Then the brown hands, they were all there by that time, lifted me to the ground.

"What is it?" demanded Ramdan with the anxiety of the whole world upon him.

"It is impossible," I said, pointing excitedly into the gulf, "it is fearful. Look at it."

He looked at it, he looked at me, he was plainly relieved.

"Camel is good for sand," he said mildly.

"That sand!" I repeated the gesture, tragically intense, and Embarek burst into a roar of laughter. He couldn't help it, he didn't have that impudent expression for nothing. I looked at him haughtily and he stopped, but all my Arabs wanted to laugh at me, all my polite Arabs!

"Bring me Nina," I said with dignity.

All the time Charlotte kept aloof, gently smiling. It was well enough for her because she had "breked" her "djeumel" somewhere back on the chott and was secure upon Bichet. You are nearer the ground on a mule and you have the brutal Arabian bit with which you could break his jaw. She cared nothing whatever about my shattered nerves.



The Arabs controlled themselves nobly and Embarek led Nina thereafter to prove his penitence. There was a restraint upon the party, silence while we surmounted one salmon-colored hill after another and the camels came with perfect safety and unimpaired stateliness over the tops.

Ramdan led the procession on white Tambor, his burnous, slightly golden now in the afternoon sun, billowing around him, and his long gun on a strap slung crosswise behind his shoulders. On the crest of a dune against the sky he was as romantically wild a figure as any Arab that Adolf Schreyer ever painted.

"Ramdan," I said when my nerves had somewhat recovered, "tell Embarek I'm not afraid of the mule. He may laugh all he wants to."

So Embarek laughed all he wanted to and undertook to tell me in French how I had looked, but I couldn't understand him. They all laughed, the salmon-colored dunes resounded with this unaccustomed mirth. Even Bubeker laughed. They became gay, doubtless telling each other how I had looked. One after another they came up to console me and Larabie walked for a while beside Nina, neglecting his camels, to treat me with sunny flashes of his beautiful teeth. So then we had

the traveling song of Kabylie, and Bubeker sang about the nomad's feelings when he approaches the wells at Lalea.

Here and there isolated palms or small groups of them stood among the dunes with sand blown halfway up their trunks. These were gardens, Ramdan said, but most of the people had left Lalea, so no one dug them out. Preventing your garden from being submerged is apparently the most strenuous thing about the cultivation of the date. The trees require hardly any care save irrigation in the spring and the gathering of the harvest in October which, if your garden is any good at all, instantly makes you a "rich man." But you need some money to get the garden in the first place, a cause for brown-eyed sadness, for how can you have a good garden if you are not a rich man and how can you be a rich man unless you have a good garden? And so Lalea is no different from anywhere, but is ripe for the endeavors of the social worker who hates to believe that the curse of the poor is poverty.

But Lalea looks different. After surmounting the last "biggen dune" a great shallow bowl lay before us backed by the pink bluffs and rising gradually at either side in perfectly bare expanses. The ground was not

stony, nor was it exactly sandy, but like a gravel beaten down and of a deep rose-color. In front of the bluff clustered a mass of palms, tall purple-brown trunks bearing up in the sky round clumps of long, drooping, shining leaves in the midst of which glistened the white dome of a mosque. A group of low houses built of the rosy earth showed through the palms around the mosque. At the right, on the extreme edge of the oasis where the immense pink expanse began to rise to the horizon, stood another mosque, also with a white dome.

We seemed to have reached Lalea, but we still traveled for nearly an hour over the comparatively hard, level ground, passing an occasional well, a hole with two adobe uprights and a beam across the top for the rope to run over. There were no ropes nor signs of use, yet some one of our party looked into each well and returned shaking his head. Charlotte and I grasped that we would stop at the first available water and we longed with a great longing for the polite pretense of Ramadan's "Shall we camp?"

We passed several houses, I can best describe them as adobe, they were made of the pink earth, the kind of mud building that melts in a heavy rain, and these were deserted

and crumbling. Most of the people had indeed left Lalea. When we reached the edge of the palms the gardens were unkempt and no water ran through the irrigation ditches. Only one man appeared in a small inclosure surrounded by a mud wall. Ramdan asked him something to which he replied hopelessly. Ramdan persevered, he had a great knack of perseverance, until the man pointed at the mosque on the pink expanse outside the oasis and thither we turned. Beyond the mosque were three large wells with pulleys and ropes on their cross beams, good wells, praise be to Allah!

But just as we were about to halt, two caravans of innumerable camels came over the edge of the horizon. Ramdan hesitated, anxiety puckered his forehead, he repeated his formula: "Shall we camp?"

It was as much a pretense as ever. In answer to our hopeful questions he spread out his hands appealingly, apologetically, "Ah, where else?"

There was nowhere else, there never is on deserts.

"Over there," I directed magnificently, since I was expected to pretend to direct. So we moved "over there" about three hundred yards and our camels knelt down. The two

caravans, when they arrived, moved "over there" about the same distance in the other direction. Most of the camels were not loaded, there must have been a hundred of them. We need not have troubled ourselves about the proximity of the caravans, the Arab never intrudes, nor is his camp an unsightly mess because he possesses almost nothing. These men, very few for so many animals, seemed to have no baggage at all. Having nothing the Arab leaves nothing behind and the public camping-place of Lalea was perfectly clean. The tin can is almost unknown to the Sahara, and the old shoe, the horror of every water-hole on American deserts, is not. After the passing of a caravan the inhabitants of the oasis gather up the camel-dung for fertilizer and to burn.

Firewood is one of the scarcest of things, scarcer sometimes than water. There was not a particle of it anywhere near Lalea, not so much as a bush big enough to grub up. The two caravans had brought their wood, but we had omitted to gather any along the way. Charlotte asked Ramdan if he could buy some from the strangers as we hated to think of our Arabs walking miles more on this quest.

"They have not enough," he said. "I will ask the marabout."

We were much too tired to inquire into the doings of marabouts. Reposing on the red carpet we watched the hundred camels, a dark mass on the bright ground, the white-gowned strangers unloading, and presently Ramdan and Saïd walking over toward the mosque. Marabouts were holy men, priests of Allah, who had mosques and influence. Bubeker knew enough Koran to be a marabout. We idly contemplated the watering of the hundred camels. It was a large-scale reproduction of Dinar except that here the desert pressed in upon a human village and encroached over the very threshold of Allah.

The wells were deeper than Dinar's, the water more jealous of itself, and the air was full of the squeaking of pulleys while the men drew up the sheepskin buckets. Sometimes they drew them hand over hand, but more often two would walk away with the rope leaving a third to pour out the water when it appeared. Endlessly they went to and fro, and the camels sauntered up to the wells, disdainfully, as though they were wrapped in thoughts far above creature comforts. They had carried in their own feed, bundles of the hay-like desert grass called "dreen." There was not a spear of grass for any beast to eat at Lalea, and presently we saw Larabie and

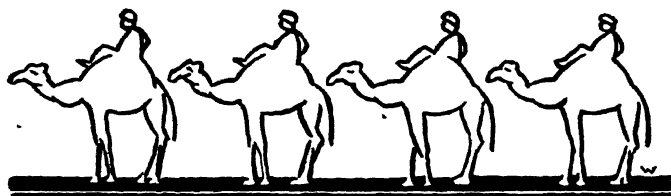
Abdulla in conversation with the strangers. Soon our men returned followed by several others each carrying a bundle of dreen in his arms, so we knew that we had traded at the wells.

The strangers greeted Bubeker because he lived thereabouts and was an Ouled Saïd and they belonged to the same tribe. They clasped his hand and while the hands were clasped the two men raised them and each kissed his own. Then Bubeker followed the Ouled Saïds back to the wells and helped at the ropes.

All the while the sun was slowly sinking toward the edge of the bowl over which the caravans had come and the air was a radiant purity. Behind the mosque the mass of palms seemed swimming in liquid light. They seemed not to be rooted in the ground at all, and the distant white dome and cluster of houses among them seemed not to belong to this earth. The oasis had the bright unreality of mirage, only an appearance in unchanging desolation.

Dream-like Lalea with sand blown into her deserted gardens might easily make you think about the widespread illusion of the importance of human undertakings; the camel-drivers walking to and fro might make you

think thoughts anthropological and archæological and historical and pictorial, learned and sad; but red carpets outside round tents are always complacent, they never insist on contemplation sliding into meditation nor on meditation leading you to facts. The peaceful carpet holds the world dissolved in a transparent, bright liquid, suspended in it. We reposed in a state of blissful rest, and Lalea, her date-palms, her mosques, her wells, her Ouled Saïds, her hundred camels, her mythical marabout, was an illustration in some gorgeous, untranslated, old-world book.



VI

BUT Saïd broke in upon us. Saïd's appearance was always such that he could break in upon anything; this time he wore the linen duster, a disheveled turban and no socks at all. It was one of the occasions when his black face was not villainous, solemn instead, and his dozen words of French, assisted by gestures, informed us that the mythical marabout desired our presence. Saïd's solemnity made us aware of an honor not at all mythical, and though we could have dispensed with honors at that moment we gathered that the invitations of marabouts are like those of royalty in that you accept them. We dragged ourselves up with the best grace we could and followed the coal-black "cook-man" toward the mosque. The pulleys on the wells were still squeaking and the white dome was still rosy with the last rays of the sun. At the door Ramdan met us. He was impressively solemn too.

They led us into a small hallway with an earth floor, up a winding, dirty stair and across an open roof into the one room under the dome. The room had no door and everything was covered with sand. Ramdan explained that this was a new mosque, unfinished.

"They are too poor," he said.

Bubeker and an unknown Arab were spreading down a thick, oriental rug on the sandy floor, then they brought a pine kitchen-table and four kitchen chairs. We waited silently for these preparations to be complete. Ramdan and Saïd and Bubeker had the hush of portentous events. Then the four of us sat down and Bubeker addressed us with a solemnity unmatchable. Ramdan translated:

"Will you have coffee or tea?"

I was a little overwhelmed but I managed to choose coffee. Charlotte was still in the coma of the carpet, incapable of choice.

Bubeker and the unknown servitor retired. Ramdan and Saïd sat on in grave silence and we were silent too, waiting for ceremonies. It was hard to know what ceremonies could be so grave in this crude room with sand blown into its corners and the incongruity of that rich-looking eastern rug, tattered a little, and this table and these chairs which

might have come from Grand Rapids. The furniture must have been another manifestation of French influence—sometimes an officer or two may pass through Lalea—and it had been brought out for this anomaly of American guests. We wished that it had not, just as we wished that Saïd would not wear that linen duster and those Boston garters.

For some time the two men sat in motionless abstraction, their faces fallen into sad, strong lines. Then suddenly they arose and stood with devotedly lowered eyes. We arose also from the kitchen-chairs.

A very young man, a mere boy, in the costume of a desert Arab, almost as poorly dressed as a nomad, hurriedly entered the room. He greeted both men with the hand-kissing and they each, with reverent gestures, kissed his turban. Then Ramdan presented us and the youth shook hands awkwardly, staring at us without smiling.

We sat down again, but there were only four chairs so Ramdan stood, he always managed to convey the impression that Saïd was a more important person than himself. The youth continued to stare in the silence which again ensued, a stare which became a little hard to encounter, especially when Ramdan

and Saïd also began to regard us intently, Ramdan with the pleading, deprecating expression he always wore when he presented us with anything which our unfathomable American point of view might not understand. This silence was different from the other, it began to have the quality of the dreadful pause of social incompetence. I had once more a sharp sense of being in a movie without knowing my rôle and I evidently had one. I looked at Charlotte for succor, but she was unaware of any rôle, an irresponsibility which I registered for comment later.

"Tell him," I said to Ramdan, "that it is an honor and a pleasure to be here. We appreciate his kindness extremely."

Ramdan broke into a relieved smile, but he looked puzzled, so I simplified the remark. He translated it to the marabout who nodded, still staring at us.

"Tell him," I went on after another unfruitful pause, "that we are enchanted with Lalea. It is beautiful."

Ramdan translated again, but he had to have "enchantée" and "belle" before he could. The marabout merely nodded and stared at us.

"Tell him," I tried the third time, raising my voice in the hope of waking Charlotte,

"that we are happy to know the Arabs. They are a good, kind people. We never see Arabs in America. We never knew them before. It is happiness."

Still there was no result, the marabout simply nodding. He was receptive at least, but I felt as though I were pouring amenities into a bottomless well and I became aware that I ached all over from riding Maybrick and Nina through the "biggen dunes."

"Ask him," I told Ramdan, emphasis on "ask," for it occurred to me that if I asked him he might possibly answer, "where those two great caravans outside are going?"

But he didn't. Ramdan answered. They were going to the oasis of Temacine to be loaded with dates for Laguat, a fifteen-days' journey.

"Ah, there are many camels!" he said. "They belong to the marabout of Temacine. He is very rich man. He have many gardens."

As he spoke his eyes rested with such protecting tenderness on the staring youth that I was able to know in spite of my aches that this marabout had no gardens to speak of.

"He is very young," Ramdan explained in a lowered voice, pleadingly. "He is only marabout six months. He is shy."

I frowned at Charlotte and laying hold of her arm pinched it until she woke up enough to smile at the shy marabout. Happily at this moment Bubeker brought the coffee. There were only four cups, so Ramdan and Saïd shared one. There were also little squares of white, spongy cheese made of goats' milk. Charlotte woke up some more, and told the marabout that his cheese was delicious and that she had never tasted goats' milk and had always wanted to.

And he answered!

"He says he will send you some," Ramdan translated.

We both burst into thanks and the staring youth actually smiled. He was used to being thanked. After he smiled the strain of the visit became less severe, so we could enjoy the thick, sweetened coffee.

"He gives us wood too," Ramdan went on beamingly. "He has sent it."

We thanked the youth again, profusely, and he smiled again. I suggested to Ramdan that we would like to give some money for the forty inhabitants remaining at Lalea, who must be very poor, judging from the appearance of their mosque and the poverty of the marabout. Ramdan's face expressed consternation.

"No, no!" he protested. "You not pay him. If he take money he is not good marabout."

"But for his people," I urged, "or to finish his mosque."

"No! He must give to strange-men. You are strange-men. It is our religion. This is a—a hotel of Allah."

"A hostelry of God," said Charlotte mildly. "We are thankful for the kindness of Allah. Tell him."

The shy youth almost forgot his shyness when this was translated to him, it was translated with amplification for we heard the name of Allah several times. I always resign when Charlotte wakes up. The boy forgot himself enough to slake his curiosity with questions about America, so we explained, in a brave mixture of English and French, how big our country is, and about the great cities where the buildings touch the sky, and about the mountains with snow on them like the Djurjuras, and the deserts like the Sahara, only smaller, oh yes, smaller, not to be compared with his desert.

He seemed to be intensely interested, his stare became easy to encounter, and then, abruptly, he arose and left us. We were startled into open-mouthed silence by this leave-taking, but Ramdan and Saïd were not sur-

prised. Ramdan sat down in the marabout's empty chair admitting that he was tired. We were all tired. The silence dragged into minutes while the oblong of the doorless doorway became blue with twilight. Feeling that perhaps I still had a rôle I suggested that we might go, because Saïd had to cook that elaborate dinner for which we felt a need. Ramdan was surprised and disappointed, but he said, spreading out his hands, that we must please ourselves. We hastily assured him that we had no wish to leave and inquired as tactfully as possible what we were waiting for. It appeared that we were waiting for tea!

Charlotte, wide-awake, regarded me with reproach.

"You should have asked for tea in the first place," she said. "It would have been less trouble for them. You would have had plain tea first and then tea flavored with mint leaves. The mint is the sign that the visit is over, you can't go until you have tea flavored with mint. I told you that two weeks ago. I read it in a book."

That was like her, she is always reading things in books and expecting me to remember what she reads. I was annoyed with her, and we sat on in sulky silence until the mara-

bout returned followed by the unknown Arab bearing tea. Sure enough, it was flavored with mint.

To its accompaniment, extraordinarily good, we learned that the shy youth's predecessor had been a very great marabout indeed, a man to whose mosque all the Ouled Saïds made pilgrimages. He had been ninety-four when he died, venerable and venerated. Ramdan spoke of him in a hushed voice. He became very earnest as, urged by our questions, he described the aged marabout, conjuring up with words and gestures, pointed by his own solemnity and Saïd's, the image of the venerable priest with the Ouled Saïds, looking like the camel drivers by the wells outside, camped around his mosque waiting for him to heal their souls with holy wisdom and comfort their bodies with wood and "dreen" and goats' milk. The great marabout's every word had been treasured as the word of a prophet. He knew the Koran from cover to cover, he was the friend of Allah, and he was "prévoyant."

"You know—prévoyant. He tells you how many children you have and where you go next year."

Ramdan explained very earnestly, his eyes resting on the shy youth who had fallen silent

again and sat gazing abstractedly through the blue oblong of the door. He saw the young marabout, in fact had seen him all the time, in the mantle of this august predecessor. And we saw him then in the mantle of a long line of predecessors, a line going far behind the coming of Mohammed, priests as priests were in the beginning of the world, not only the descendants of prophets but prophets themselves, their words treasured by the simple, their dignity unspeakable, their holiness unthinkable, conversing directly with God, seers, "prévoyant."

"Oh, yes," said Charlotte with awe-struck faith, "prévoyant."

Grand Rapids and social incompetence and Boston garters sank into oblivion. Saïd had never been aware of them, but Ramdan, more touched by western civilization that bewildered without changing him, had been begging with dog-like eyes for understanding. We understood. We venerated. The sandy room was full of an odor of ancient sanctity which no Methodist nor Unitarian minister could possibly achieve in his neat study. If we could only have sat cross-legged on the thick, tattered rug!

We softly consulted Ramdan about the sad abstraction of the holy youth, for his young

face as he gazed through the blue oblong had a settled sadness.

"He say he is afraid he can't be a great marabout, he is so young. He is afraid," and tears shone in Ramdan's eyes.

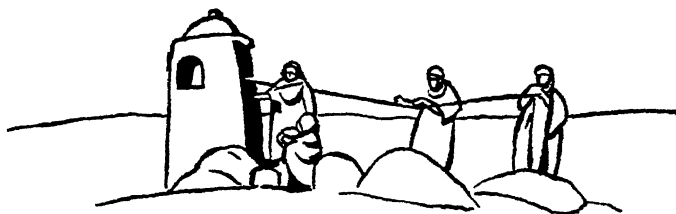
Charlotte arose and instantly they all stood up.

"Tell him," she directed, "that we know he will be a very great marabout, one of the greatest, and that Lalea will be a holy town as before. Tell him too that we are thankful to see him. We will never forget him. It is a great honor."

Ramdan told him and the shy youth smiled once more, but uncertainly. Then he raised his hand and said something to the two Arabs to which they listened with the deepest reverence.

"It is a blessing," Ramdan murmured.

So we begged also for the marabout's blessing and we think that he bestowed it upon us though we were only Christian dogs.



VII

THE next morning we departed from Lalea up the bare, rose-colored expanse toward the sky. Just why we left Lalea so quickly remains one of the mysteries of the Sahara.

"What you like," Ramdan had said at breakfast—Saïd's breakfasts were terrible, the bitter coffee of small French hotels, boiled eggs whose hardness or softness could never be foretold, and bread which he toasted until it was as unbreakable as the pink stones under our feet. From the first the butter was impossible, so we had apricot jam. The only mitigation of breakfast was moving the table outside the tent soon after the athletic sun sprang up and eating in the thrill of the morning air. On traveling days Sebehe and Embarek took the tent down while we ate, so we knew that the morning after the marabout had blessed us was a traveling day because they began to knock out the pegs as soon as the bitter coffee was served.

"What you like," Ramdan had said in an-

swer to the protest of our weariness. "All is for you. You say, I do it."

But he managed to convey that it would be difficult to do. The difficulty was unmistakable. The tent was collapsing onto the ground and now we saw that Saïd's two huge boxes were corded and ready.

"Then where can we camp for a while and rest?" asked Charlotte.

"At Guerrara." He beamed, spreading out his hands. "Ah, Guerrara is nice. We camp a day, two days, a month! All same to me. All for your pleasure. You say. I do it."

Guerrara was a mere three days off. Perhaps there was a well like Dinar on the way, good water, good feed, many bushes to burn?

"Ah, no!" he was sorrowfully apologetic. There was a well at noon on the second day, but it was not good for camping. "We take water," he explained, "we go on. We make three days to Guerrara. Guerrara is nice. I find good place. You rest."

"Well—all right."

"American good for traveling!" his smile burst upon us. "Not like French women. No. French women tire. We go back."

"We might as well go on as go back, friend Ramdan. All right. Allons nous!"

But we rode the mules that day on account of our necks. Charlotte was more like a mummy than ever. I begged her not to cover her face as though she were wearing a yashmak because I liked to look at her. She said that her mind was embalmed, that her body ought to be symbolical, and that she would do nothing about it. I sighed. It was always an effort to climb upon Nina because the immense, red, upholstered saddle was so loosely cinched that it turned round when I hove my weight into the stirrup. Embarek had to hold the saddle on the other side, Sebehe had to hold Nina's head, Ramdan had to push me up, and then they all would adjust my burnous around my knees and pad me in tenderly. Mounting Nina made me feel my age. Invariably I would be moved to tell Ramdan about my beautiful wild horse at home, how her name was Peggy and how I leapt upon her and went galloping through the woods. Ramdan would listen with a receptive smile and offer me Tambor, but there was a loose-jointed, wabby appearance about Tambor's hind legs that I didn't like.

Charlotte was right about keeping on the yashmak. The sun looked down on the immense, hard, rose-colored slope with passionate burning. We climbed to the rim of the

expanse whence Lalea was a glistening mirage like a silver heat-shimmer. On the height the plain we had come over from Dinar gave us the same illusion of great waters which we had had when we descended into Biskra. The view filled Ramdan with calm satisfaction.

"Like sea," he said. "Desert all same."

Yes, "all same," a burnished shield reflecting back the heat and light of the sun. The country we were traveling through was almost bare of vegetation, sterile, stony, yet the sun, the great fecundator, shed his fullest glory upon it. Instead of life he bestowed beauty. All around us the plateau was cut into rough, clay-like mounds and pinnacles, ugly shapes, but the sun laid red-violet shadows on their sides. He made each little stone glitter, he made Lalea shine like a bride in a silver veil, he streaked the level stretch beyond with purple and yellow until he merged it in blue-green water, dream water, his dream, perhaps, of life. He embraced the earth, loving her even in death. When she is all a desert, covered with silence, his imagination will make her beautiful.

For what can beauty be other than the transmutation of so-called facts by an intuition of the seeing heart? Certainly these

red mounds and pinnacles are not beautiful, nor these stunted, unhappy shrubs, nor the great plain that we presently came into, sprinkled with coarse, unlovely growths. The matter-of-fact reproductions of the camera display their ugliness, as ugly as the dance of the Ouled Nails, but an artist setting up his canvas there intuitively translates them. His picture is truer than the photograph, the facts are in it dissolved in something more.

The red plain that we came into past the mounds and pinnacles was as monotonously unvaried as the one leading to Dinar. Bubliker was still the guide. He walked ahead with Maybrick on whose swaying hump Sebehe sat in his striped gondura. Maybrick inspired Sebehe to song. She inspired him to sadness, too, for all the songs were laments punctuated by those strange, sudden stops in which the air still seemed to vibrate with poignancy. The whole caravan was inundated with sadness, musical sadness, a not unhappy sadness. Between Sebehe's songs one or the other of the men would indulge in a chant, always with falling cadences, always mournful. Saïd ambled along on his white mule—no one else ever dared to get on that mule—his legs draped over the wide panniers,

his head sunk between his shoulders, muttering to himself, probably the Koran. The words of an old song from the Arabic kept running through my head until I too lifted up my voice. They listened to me with the same attention with which they listened to each other.

“Allah gives light in darkness,
Allah gives rest in pain:
Cheeks that are white with weeping
Allah paints red again.”

Sadness prevailed on the red desert. By noon of the second day we were in a hard, stony, dull-red country, no longer a plain but a land of red hills and flat-topped bluffs. The vegetation was almost nil and what there was of it had a greyish color. At midday the sun laid few shadows on the smouldering hills, the harsh landscape was unrelieved by violet or green or blue. Especially we missed blue, the color of enchantment, the color of the sky and deep water, of mountains on far-off horizons, of summer nights, and dusk in the arcades of forests. The red desert at noonday was a stark, unveiled sorrow. Mournful songs that might express its mornings and evenings could not express its noons; only the slow chanting of the Koran accompanied our descent into a polished red bowl to the well of Sidi Mohamud.

We lunched there—not a bush, not a projecting rock, not a particle of shade. A hot, red haze filled the bowl, in the middle of which stood the massive uprights and crossbeam of the well. The water was sixty meters below the surface of the ground. Three Arabs in the costumes of nomads were filling their goatskins. Two of them walked away with the rope, sixty meters, and back sixty meters, and away and back, a path was worn where they walked. They filled our goatskins also, we took water for the rest of the trip to Guerrara though we passed another well the following morning. As we had forty kilometers to travel on the third day we asked Ramdan why he had not made this well the night before. He shook his head sorrowfully, the water was eighty meters down, there were no uprights and pulley, no rope and bucket, loaded camels should only average twenty-five kilometers and it was best to have the long day last. We would all, Arabs and beasts and “strange-men,” rest at Guerrara.

The three Arabs at Sidi Mohamud greeted Bubeker with hand-kissing, for we were still in the land of the Ouled Saïds. They were said to have a garden “up there,” but we could see no sign of such a thing. We know that they had a flock of goats because Abdulla,

everybody's slave, vanished among the bluffs and returned with a bottle of goats' milk. It was warm and tasted richly of the goat, but we drank it. The three Arabs had constituted themselves our hosts and were gratified by our appreciation. At leave-taking they shook hands with us, we said "Ebk'â 'âla r'eir," they said "Emchi besslama," may you travel without accident, and we said "In cha Allah."

That night the camp was in a hard, red hollow like the bowl of Sidi Mohamud. The camels wandered disconsolately in the twilight, not getting enough to eat. We carried grain for the mules and Tambor, but there was no "dreen" to spread before them along the rope to which they were hobbled. More of the men than usual washed their hands and faces with sand and said their prayers. Allah is kind to the faithful when they go into the desert. The Koran strictly enjoins washing before prayer but if "ye find no water, take fine clean sand, and rub your faces and your hands therewith. God would not put a difficulty upon you."

The forty kilometers of the third day were an endless progressing without change, a toiling down into a red bowl and a toiling up again with hope of seeing from the ridge the

dark spot of Guerrara, blessed green in the everlasting red, and seeing no spot. There are intervals like that in living, when you seem to travel endlessly among ugly things and the little heights you set your hope upon display no prospects when you attain them.

But intervals must end, and we reached a hilltop at last from which we had a prospect of Guerrara. The sun was marching down behind the oasis, blurring with hot haze the dark mass of palms and gleam of white roofs in a shallow valley surrounded by hills of deep salmon-color. The green fleck on the endless red was very far off—seeing an oasis and getting to it are different matters. We continued to progress, descending into more basins and losing the prospect for over two hours before we came through a gateway in the low hills to the gardens. There were many, many, a broad belt of palms on level ground, dominated by a white town surrounded by a wall set with towers, compact and glistening upon a hill. A minaret shaped like an obelisk pointed from it at the sky, and the call to prayer slid through the glistening air as we reached the edge of the gardens.

Guerrara is a city of the thrifty Mozabites, a Mohammedan sect who once possessed the rich oases around Touggourt and were

driven by war into this red desolation. Their capital is Ghardaïa, still further west, and the region is known as the M'zab. Unlike the sand-choked gardens of Lalea the gardens of the Mozabites were prosperous, separated from each other by low, mud walls between which ran paths beaten hard by many bare feet. Under the palms wheat and vegetables, figs and pomegranates grew. Everywhere were wells with uprights and crossbeams, and camels and mules walked back and forth drawing up water which men poured into stone troughs whence it ran along the irrigation ditches through the gardens. We heard the squeaking of the pulleys long before we reached the wells. The oasis was like a deep-piled, green rug laid down on the red desert, the luscious green of spring, cut into a pattern of squares by salmon-colored walls.

We followed a sort of track along the edge of the gardens where we met the Mozabites, mostly stout and prosperous-looking, riding mules. On our right were the palms and wells, on our left the hard, red, bare ground rising to hills under which were pitched the black tents of the nomads. The nomad comes into the oases and camps at their edges. He is anything but prosperous-looking, lean, ragged, incredibly ragged. His tent is made

of coarse goats' or camels' hair rugs, almost black, striped sometimes with brown, and is pitched over poles hardly four feet high. He crawls in to sleep like a beast in its den. The rest of the time he builds his fire of twigs in front of the low opening and lives outdoors. He possesses nothing except a camel, perhaps, an ass or two and a few thin goats which his children drive to pasture on the dry tufts of grass among the hills.

About a quarter of a mile from the town we left the beaten track and turned toward the black tents. Like the nomads we could camp outside the gardens and draw water from the wells. Ramdan found a small plateau removed a little from the other vagrants and sheltered on one side by a ridge of red gravel. He asked us if we liked the spot. We liked it extremely. From the elevated seclusion of the plateau the poverty-stricken misery of the nomads was interestingly picturesque, while before us, across a space of rosy desert, lay the rich shadows of the palms, and by climbing the ridge, some twenty feet high, we had a view of the whole oasis with the walled white town on the hilltop. Only Saïd was displeased. Why he was displeased remained another mystery of the Sahara. Words were flung between him and Ramdan,

energetic words full of consonants, and there was much gesticulation. For once we rejoiced in the wall of foreign speech, the disruption of the ménage could by no chance become our business. We gazed for a startled moment at the violent "cook-man," cooks are so apt to be our business, and then, just to savor such detachment, turned our backs upon his displeasure and ascended the gravel ridge.

We sat there on the red carpet while the sun went down behind Guerrara. The western sky was streaked with gold and indigo clouds supplying the enchanting color of blue which the red country lacked. The walled town was a rosy whiteness on the sky and the minaret a dark, pointing silhouette. On the side toward the oasis the roofs slid down the hill to meet the palms where the main gate, a square of blackness, led through the ramparts. The Mozabites, their burnouses almost touching the ground on either side of their mules, vanished through the portal from the golden light that flooded the bare expanse between our ridge and the wall of the town. More blue lay along the bottom of the wall and squares of blue shadow separated the angles and sides of houses.

Flocks of goats, driven by shepherds in

the rags of the nomads, came over the hills and moved across the bright expanse. They vanished from the light through the dark square of the gate. The squeaking of the well-pulleys gradually ceased, the camels and the asses were driven in through the gate. All the while a confused, sweet murmur like distant, indistinct music rose into the sky above the white walls, the voices of the five thousand inhabitants cooking their couscous while the goats came home to be milked for the children's suppers.

VIII



ONLY a patient person would have followed me thus far, I realize, but traveling on deserts requires patience above all things. You wait most of the time, and there are no ancient copies of Collier's and the Saturday Evening Post, such as ornament the golden oak tables in doctors' offices, lying around on the sand to mitigate your waiting, nothing but an irresponsible carpet. You wait for the camels to be packed in the morning, for the lunch to be spread, for the tents to be pitched, for your dinner, for the stars, for the sunrise, for your neck to stop aching, and with the greatest patience of all you wait for the wind to stop blowing. Most of the time at Guerrara we waited for the last

two events, and especially for the wind to stop blowing.

There did not seem to be much sand on the ground, yet the air was full of it and a white cloud of it dimmed the city on the hill. The sun was shining above the cloud with the effect of sunlight through fog, except that fog is silent and a dust-cloud is tumultuous. The wind whisked over our stony plateau and whipped the edges of the tent noisily back and forth. Walking anywhere in a flapping burnous was unbearable and walking in our riding suits without one startled the natives too much. Wearing a burnous is an art in itself. A burnous is a hampering garment conducive to meditation, eminently suitable for sitting on carpets. Wearing burnouses may be why the Arab leaves so much to Allah. We used to wonder how Abdulla and Larabie could bear to have the edges of their white mantles continually falling over their hands while they were loading the camels. They would sweep the picturesque garments back with swift gestures and go on tying knots, but unquestionably they would have been more efficient in overalls. The influence of costume on character is an interesting subject. There are petticoats and corsets and French heels and the inability of most middle-aged women to

walk a mile—but every suggestion cannot be pursued.

Guerrara was fascinating to look at from the carpet and full of suggestions, but I will not pursue any of them. They had to do with antiquity, the scene held the flavor of it, with the sweet, far-off murmur of voices rising from the walls all day long, persistently for hundreds of years, with the herding of goats, with nomads, with camels and asses walking back and forth in the treadmill of the wells, with the call to prayer from the minaret, with Allah and his prophet. The ancient, unchanging, life-as-it-always-has-been atmosphere enveloped us, densely, mixed up with the dust-cloud.

Startling, then, were the young French lieutenant and his wife, who, not wearing burnouses, came out of the dusty antiquity to call upon us. They were much more startling than the magnificent, swarthy Arab in a scarlet burnous, riding a cavorting white horse around our camp earlier in the day. He belonged to Guerrara, they, symbols of the new, what had they to do with it? The lieutenant, slim and fair, in the inspiring light-blue uniform of France—khaki and drab may be more efficient but that blue makes you hear the bugles blow—and Madame, in a

costume suitable for a Parisian boulevard, emerged from the blowing sand.

In the startled moment of seeing them the slim, young lieutenant was terrific. All alone, supported by a single telegraph wire and the assistance of the native Caïd, he dominated the region. To the inhabitants thereof he must have seemed the superman toward whom some modern philosophers tell us that we should all endeavor to evolve. He was alone, he and Madame were the only French people in Guerrara, yet he could play a tune on little keys which would bring more blue uniforms and blue burnouses over the hills, or fill the air above the minaret with the humming crescendo of aeroplanes.

But the lieutenant, apart from Guerrara, was by no means terrific to encounter, though his immaculateness, together with the Parisian chic of Madame, made us acutely aware of our own disorder. Everything was in windy disorder. In spite of Sebehe's periodical crawling around inside the tent to lay stones on its flapping lower edge a coating of salmon-colored dust covered all our possessions and ourselves. We were disheveled, at intervals we had been sleeping because sitting on red carpets is apt to alternate with slumber. All the men were sleeping. Only Ramadan, the ever watchful, was on hand.

The immaculate guests entered the tent and Ramdan wiped off the two chairs with his burnous.

"Pardon," he said, smiling ingratiatingly, "Arabs have a saying, when the wind blows sleep is good."

The lieutenant agreed with this sentiment. When the wind blows there is nothing to do but sleep. Allah is kind if he permits you to sleep. But this is just a little wind, not really to be called a wind, not really a sleeping wind. But we must all be fatigued. From Touggourt? Extraordinary! "C'est vrai!" And Madame, he addressed himself to me, Madame must be extremely fatigued?

I roused myself from wishing that I had on a necktie and my riding boots instead of moccasins, and essayed to answer him. His face remained a courteous blank. My conversational French, my dear French that I had acquired mainly on the Fabre Line coming from New York and which Ramdan so flatteringly understood, conveyed nothing to him. Ramdan had to tell him that I was not seriously fatigued and that the interest of the country more than compensated for any weariness. I suppose that I could converse so fluently with Ramdan, and with Messaoud back there in Biskra, because their French

was an acquired characteristic like my own. I suppose that Thomas Cook and Son's chauffeurs and all maîtres d'hôtel can understand every Anglo-Saxon variation. It's their business to. I suppose the French that gets you a room and "déjeuner" and transports your baggage and arranges about the washing and buys "pâtisserie" is not the French of social amenities. It was very humiliating and it intimidated me so I hardly dared try again. It intimidated Charlotte to such an extent that she never tried at all. Ramdan stood in the door of the tent, immobile, his arms folded, his mustache curling fiercely under his loose, untidy turban—he hadn't had time to wind it properly—and interpreted.

Madame was interested in our clothes. French women never wore knickerbockers, she said, "c'est dommage." She had the pale face of a dweller indoors, a marked contrast to the lieutenant's husky sunburn. She had been in Guerrara two years. Yes, she liked the desert but she found it lonely sometimes. Nobody ever came. She saw only Arabs, Arabs.

Saïd served tea, a pleasant surprise, we had not been sure that he was awake. He grinned his villainous, front-toothless grin, and the lieutenant conversed affably with him

in Arabic. Then Madame suggested that we walk in the gardens, for she thought the wind was going down. It evidently was going down or Saïd could never have conveyed sandless crackers and dates over from the cook-tent. We put on our burnouses, Charlotte tried to put on her turban, winding part of it around her neck in order to pull it up over her face and look like a mummy, but I frowned at her and she desisted. We issued from the tent, Ramdan and Saïd both following respectfully.

The wind had quieted, so the air was fairly clear, and the late afternoon sun touched the rose-colored expanse between our little plateau and the palms in the oasis with gold. The long, green fronds held aloft in the sky, still waving a little, glistened and had golden auras around them.

We entered the gardens, walking along the beaten-down, pink paths between the low, mud walls. The ground was everywhere a network of dikes and trenches surrounding green rugs from which arose the slim, straight trunks of the date-palms, columns supporting a green roof. The sunlight filtered through the tall, brown-purple trunks in long rays full of innumerable bright dust-motes and lay in gold patches on the ground. The shadows

between the gold were red-violet on the walls and paths, and rich green on the squares of wheat and vegetables. White-turbaned boys were busy directing water around the squares in little trenches which they dammed and dug through until the whole was watered. We crossed the main canal, some eight feet wide, full of green water, whence the shallow trenches were supplied, and passed close to some of the wells before which the camels and asses walked up and down, their drivers stopping to stare at us, to salute the lieutenant and answer his pleasant Arabic remarks.

After the glare of the red desert the gardens were like a cool, green temple, full of blessed shade, full of peace save for the treadmill of the wells; and we knew why the Mohammedan paradise, designed for dwellers on deserts, is a garden which shall remain forever green and yield its fruits without toil. The Koran never tires of assuring the good that God will lead them "into gardens beneath which rivers flow."

"It is watered by rivers; its food is perpetual, and its shade also: this shall be the reward of those who fear God."

"But for him who dreadeth the tribunal of his Lord are prepared two gardens: (Which, therefore, of your Lord's benefits will ye un-

gratefully deny?) planted with shady trees. Which, therefore, of your Lord's benefits will ye ungratefully deny? In each of them shall be two fountains flowing. Which, therefore, of your Lord's benefits will ye ungratefully deny? In each of them shall there be of every fruit two kinds. Which, therefore, of your Lord's benefits will ye ungratefully deny? They shall repose on couches, the linings whereof shall be of thick silk interwoven with gold: and the fruit of the two gardens shall be near at hand to gather.

"And besides there shall be two other gardens: (Which, therefore, of your Lord's benefits will ye ungratefully deny?) Of a dark green. Which, therefore, of your Lord's benefits will ye ungratefully deny? In each of them shall be two fountains pouring forth plenty of water. Which, therefore, of your Lord's benefits will ye ungratefully deny? In each of them shall be fruits, and palm trees, and pomegranates. Which, therefore, of your Lord's benefits will ye ungratefully deny? Therein shall be agreeable and beautiful damsels: Which, therefore, of your Lord's benefits will ye ungratefully deny? Whom no man shall have deflowered before their destined spouses, nor any genius. Which, therefore, of your Lord's benefits will

ye ungratefully deny? Therein shall they delight themselves, lying on green cushions and beautiful carpets. Which, therefore, of your Lord's benefits will ye ungratefully deny? Blessed be the name of thy Lord, possessed of glory and honour!"

Our wanderings were in the general direction of the town, and we finally emerged from the gardens at the place where the white houses fell down the hill to meet the palms. Near their joining puffs of black smoke kept coming up from behind a high wall. That smoke had bothered us more or less since we had pitched our tents outside Guerrara, and it bothered us especially that afternoon, for certainly no black smoke shall rise on the edges of the gardens of paradise. No other smoke ever seemed to rise from Guerrara. An Arab town is a smokeless town. The bushes packed in from the desert are costly in labor if not in money, and the Arabs are frugal with fires as with everything else, lighting them only for the brief hour of cooking couscous. We had taken the smoke for French influence and had not asked about it, but after associating for two hours with the immaculate lieutenant and chic Madame the western passion for facts, dormant in us under the unmitigated influence of the Arab, asserted itself.

Our friends led us through a gate in the high wall into a small inclosure with a single stone kiln in a corner where Arabs were burning the native rock, reducing it to a white powder which they mix with water for the plastering of their houses and for a coarse pottery they make. The primitive potter's wheel was in evidence, and the primitive camel that had just brought in a load of fuel for the kiln. It was an Arab industry, an ancient industry coeval with the building of white houses from the soil of deserts, an infant industry whose maturity may be a row of furnaces under a roof and freight cars dumping coal on sidings. But by the gardens of Paradise shall be no smoke, for in them is no need for houses and the vessels wherefrom the blessed drink the water of heaven shall be miraculously provided like the black-eyed "hur al oyem."

We emerged from the factory into a narrow open space between the edge of the gardens and the wall of the town wherein stood a white two-story building in Moorish style, the dwelling of the lieutenant and Madame. The rude attempts at lace-like carving on the façade were much defaced and part of the parapet of the roof had fallen off. The lieutenant pointed at his house, smiling.

"We had some blessed rain," he said, "and it melted away."

A voluminous Arab, he seemed to be made entirely of draperies, the top layer of blue cloth like the lieutenant's inspiring uniform, sat by the door, and the magnificent individual in the crimson burnous came around the corner of the house as we approached the entrance. They both saluted the lieutenant. He led us into his "bureau," a small plastered room with a corner fireplace shaped exactly like those in Pueblo Indian adobes, and thence through a low, curtained doorway into his living room. After the brightness outside it was pleasantly dark, furnished with Turkish rugs and divans and many inlaid stands. The walls, hung with rugs, were ornamented with oriental daggers and swords. Opening from it was the kitchen with a huge mud stove built into one side, whereon, Madame said a little disdainfully, was prepared "cuisine Arabe." The living-room opened also into her garden where she next took us to see her fruit trees and vegetables. Though the recent rain insured a good year she made no attempt to have flower-beds because flowers required too much watering and too much care. "It is all too uncertain," she sighed. There were several Arabs working in the

garden and we had seen two turbaned youths in the kitchen, but the question of domestic help seems to be as pressing in Guerrara as elsewhere. The lieutenant and Madame shook their heads sadly over the efforts of their employees.

After this visit we all emerged again into the open space before the house where Arabs were continually passing to and fro carrying water from the gardens up into the town. Boys drove diminutive asses with panniers on each side containing water-jars, and little girls and old hags—we saw no young women thus employed—carried stone jars on their shoulders. The women wore bright-colored clothes, mostly red or blue, heterogeneous, with no apparent shape. Some of them were nomads, unveiled, utterly ragged, but no matter how ragged they were they all had earrings, bracelets, and silver necklaces or strings of beads.

A caravan of six camels loaded with immense bundles of firewood came along outside the wall of the town and turned in at a gate. We followed them up a narrow, steep street to the market place, a big, sun-filled square surrounded by cool arcades. There were little shops under the arcades, and the whole square swarmed with white-garbed

men. The Arabs always swarm in the souks. Usually you have to push your way through them, but this day they opened a respectful path for the inspiriting blue uniform. The six camels knelt down with the usual loud anguish and the barter over the bundles of firewood began. It was not a market day, so there were no peddlars squatting on the ground surrounded by baskets of green vegetables, a cause for Saïd's lamentation. The little shops under the arcades displayed the usual gay cotton cloths, the usual couscous and coffee, the usual shoes and burnouses.

The rest of the town consisted of narrow, winding streets between white, windowless walls with dark, closed doorways. We saw two or three women slinking along, looking very stout in much drapery, entirely covered by white woolen shawls which they wore over their heads and crossed over their faces leaving a space just big enough for one eye to glitter through, a very observant eye when it rested upon us. At the street corners groups of little girls, always with jewelry on, sat playing games. Once in a while a boy driving one of the asses with water-jars came through the streets, or a scavenger with two or three donkeys for the passing of whose bulging panniers we had to flatten ourselves

against the walls. The streets were all in shadow, cool defiles, while the tops of the east walls were in brightness and occasional splashes of sunlight fell through some opening. A sudden turning would bring us from dusk into light cut by the diagonal edges of blue shadows.

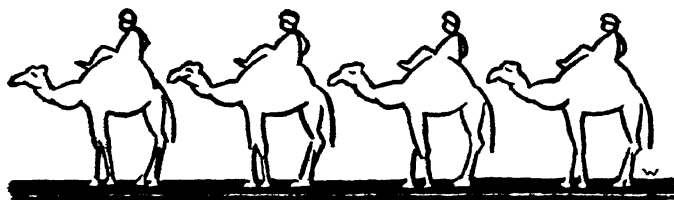
Circling through the town we found ourselves again in the square of the market place, half full now of sharp-cut blueness, and the lieutenant took us onto the roof of the Caïd's house. All around lay the rose-colored basin of Guerrara surrounded by its red hills which changed through a gamut of violets and blues as we watched them. The sun was nearly down, about to vanish in a glory of gold and purple clouds, rare clouds, and the air, still filled with fine dust though it seemed clear, reflected the colors. Instead of the austere simplicity of the sun's customary farewell to the desert this was a gorgeous embrace.

The lieutenant stood by the parapet, silent and intent. The appreciation in his eyes drew me to him though he was a veritable Frenchman to whom I could not speak. But I tried.

"J'aime le désert," I said, looking at him hopefully.

"Oui," he answered, and I managed to un-

derstand him—he never tempered his French to my comprehension like the chauffeurs and maîtres d'hôtel—"it is a terrible land and beautiful. Belle."



IX

WIND!

Our stay at Guerrara and our trip to Ghardaïa is a windy story, for the wind insists on itself. I don't mean windy in the American adaptation of the word, at least I hope not. The adjective "windy" as popularly applied to tales is one of those metaphors which naïvely reveal the general mind, the wind comes voluminously from nowhere and proceeds to no purpose. The image is apt in a way, and it isn't apt either. Voluminous from nowhere, perhaps, and to no purpose, but the wind is impetuous, blindly headlong, resentful of obstacles, young, and these are the attributes of excitement, a quality which is supposed to be absent from "windy" tales. The tellers of "windy" tales are hardly ever young, they are "old wind-bags," self-important preachers, politicians and after-dinner speakers. The wind is self-important, true, and you can debate, long and inconclusively, if such debate amuses

you, whether or not impetuous youth proceeds to any purpose. It proceeds, however, like the wind, and the chief difficulty of "windy" story-tellers is to proceed at all. So the wind has several aspects as most things have, you can look at whichever pleases you most and be right.

The wind has a riotously happy time on the desert having its own way, though there are several aspects here too, for not having their own way is more stimulating to some people than having it. By no stretch of the imagination can the desert be felt as young, that really seems not to be one of her aspects. She is old, hideously old, hopelessly old, or beautifully and poetically old, according to your view of her. She lets the wind have its own way, hustling the sand around as much as it wants to, but she has been essentially "just same" for a million years and presumably will emerge from this onslaught "just same." Hers is a quiet, mellow age. The wind disapproves of mellow age and the wind is enterprising. It piles the sky full of clouds and shouts: "Come, wake up, live, it's going to rain!" She is patient, undeceived, she knows it will not rain. The wind complains loudly about every ridge and declivity demanding to know why, if she won't live, she

doesn't lie down perfectly flat for it to rush over. It raises the mischief with her curving sand dunes. As for blue horizons, mirages and such things, what has a hag like her to do with ornaments? The wind blots them all out with the dust of its triumphant reformations.

The wind banged about at Guerrara. The tents, being obstacles, were mercilessly dealt with. The forlorn asses and goats of the nomads huddled under promontories of the hills, the burnouses of the Mozabites were swelling clouds, the thousand arms of the palms tossed distractedly, Guerrara, the solidest of the obstacles, really almost immovable, was overwhelmed with dust, and all the couscous was full of sand. I know it was because our soup, Saïd's greatest achievement, inevitable and superb as art should be—"the somba" proved him an artist in spite of his breakfasts—had sand in it for the first time. Everybody slept who could. Tambor and the mules stood along the hobble-rope with closed eyes and depressed ears. The wind, insisting on itself, swallowed up the sweet murmur of voices that rose out of the walls of Guerrara, and attacked the red carpet so ferociously—the young resent red carpets—that we had to drag it inside the tent and tie the flap shut.

"If we were in the 'biggen dunes' now—ah!" Ramdan consoled us, on the principle probably of "don't cry, my dear, look at that beggar-child and be thankful for your blessings." He illustrated the remark with a gesture of eyes and hands toward the dust-blurred sky which caused our imaginations to deal vividly with the "biggen dunes." To encourage ourselves we explained that we were lucky travelers, furnishing examples of past luck to each of which he replied with an astonished "La-la!" We assured him that when we reached his promised "sea of sand" there would be no wind, not a breath. He repeated the descriptive gesture and said "In cha Allah." His brown eyes took on the faithful-dog look as though he could not comprehend how some cruel combination of wind and sand that he remembered could have dwelt in the serene will of the Almighty.

He was hopeless about waiting any longer for the wind to stop blowing and suggested Ghardaia. No one can sleep continuously and we were receptive, especially when he described the way thither, a three days' journey, as being across a plateau, or massif, hard, stony ground, without sand. So on a chilly morning Embarek and Sebehe knocked out the tent-pegs while we drank Saïd's bitter coffee.

Dawn was quiet, but the wind awoke with the rising sun, gentle at first, almost reasonable, then gaining momentum for the day's endeavor. It blew from the west and we traveled into it. We passed the square gate of Guerara, wound under the wall past the lieutenant's house and out into the pink expanse beyond. The jail stood there, a French jail, square, white, containing one Arabian prisoner of whose crime the inelasticities of language left us ignorant. The telegraph wire to Ghardaïa led past the jail, the line of poles dwindling and vanishing over the hills. There was an attempt at a road, too, the lieutenant had pointed it out proudly from the top of the Caïd's house. It followed the poles all the way, a modern improvement, a public work. Making it consisted in raking the larger stones out of the track and piling them along the two edges, and several nomads in turbans and flapping rags were engaged in so doing. Their figures were blurred with blowing dust, and fine particles of sand stung our faces.

The wind would not have permitted a road to exist in any sandy region such as the stretch that we came over between Touggourt and Lalea, but would have buried it with sand. We did not follow the road. I do not know

why we digressed, whether for a short-cut or for some other inscrutable Arabian reason. We struck off to the left through an edge of the gardens and thence, for a while, through hollows among the hills. The digression seemed ill-advised—digressions are apt to be—for the little hollows were sandier than the high places which the road presumably kept to, and the wind allowed no particle of sand to remain upon the ground. It gave them all wings and howled because there were no more to fly through the air. Automobile goggles, fitting closely around our eyes, protected us fairly well, but I had to imitate Charlotte at last, covering my face and wrapping myself up like a mummy. Mummies in goggles, swaying back and forth on camels, cannot be accused of vanity.

Saïd was the only one of the men who wore glasses, he was always a personage. The others simply faced the blast with bowed heads, their backward-streaming draperies pressed around the contours of their lean bodies. They walked silently, bending forward on the wind, striving against it, dim white figures striving, because striving was the will of Allah.

In one of the sandy hollows we passed a family of nomads migrating in the same di-

rection as our own. A woman with a child in her arms rode the one precious camel, two bending men drove four laden asses, and a boy, holding his forearm across his eyes to keep off the biting sand, herded six goats along. The wind demoralized the goats and asses, which kept trying not to face it, and the figures of the two men and the boy, keeping the animals together, all vaguely white in the white mist which filled the valley, were full of straining effort.

The whole world was a dim whiteness, veiled from us in swishing, streaming veils. They fluttered from the dim outlines of the hills, waving upward like blowing smoke to the yellow veil of the sky. The world was filled with the sense of striving, effort, and the rising excitement of effort.

And we strove, tensely determined like the "nomad-man" and the boy who held his forearm over his eyes. I was conscious of every step of Maybrick, leaning forward with taut muscles to help her, as you lean forward sometimes in railway trains believing your will can make the wheels turn faster. There was nothing for me to anticipate except the pitching of tents in the wind again, but that seemed to be no matter. I never visualized the tents, swaying, flapping, full of sand inside. Ex-

citement arose in me, I became jubilant over every turn in the route. Impossible to see where it led to, jubilation merely over the rounding of it.

Presently we left the hills, emerging onto a flat, grey plateau with a mosaic floor of packed-down stones. Here was less sand for the wind to give wings to, and the sky, instead of being full of yellow smoke, became a roof of cold cloud. What color there was on the grey floor tended toward yellow. Yellow might be gold, the shadows on yellow might be blue, but color was lost in the dust and noise of rushing onward. The wind was terrific and had its own way. The massif was flat, bare, scarcely a shrub for an obstacle, flat to rush over. The wind rushed, hissing, along the stones.

Hour after hour it rushed; and we strove. We were trying to reach the Oued Nessa, "oued" is the Arabic word for river, a river of sand. We did not worry about what a river of sand would be like, we only tried, frantically, to get there. That young way of traveling has some merits besides excitement; we were spared worry, and as we descended into the shallow valley of the oued, quietness, surprising quietness, gradually closed around us. The wind went down with the sun as it had risen

with it. While the tents were being pitched we had the delight of a still, golden waning of day, a peace so soothing to our aged nerves—Charlotte and I were too tired to do anything but lie prone on the sand and be soothed—that the oued, carpeted with flowers and full of green shrubs, a colorful river between grey bluffs, seemed to us an oasis of paradise worthy to be described in the Koran.

In the American language a “oued” would be called a “wash,” and the massif would be called a “mesa.” Oueds are shallow cuts through the stony table-land, dry river-beds full of grass variegated with blue and yellow flowers, luxuriant bushes, comparatively, and even a few trees, reminiscences of water and promises. We did not know the names of the plants which adorned the Oued Nessa, a careless omission, but we comforted ourselves by remembering that they were before Adam named them. The occasional trees were like live oaks, and the large shrubs, almost trees, like the smoke tree and the mesquite, but a mesquite without thorns. The only plant we knew the name of was “retum,” Ramdan’s spelling, the bush with white flowers that Maybrick loved to eat. It glistened in the setting sun, clumps eight feet high, like huge snowballs.

The infrequent wells of the stony massifs are in the oueds—no nomad well this time like the one at Dinar, no unguarded hole in the sand, but a French military water supply at the point where the road to Ghardaïa, which we had not followed, crossed the oued. The road had a hard time crossing, a pile of sand was drifted over the middle of it, and if you had not known that it was a road you would never have suspected it of being one. The well was protected by a massive concrete structure, low, oblong, rounded over on top, solid-looking, impregnable. An Arab guarded it and had to be applied to for a key. The wild sides of the wild oued rose above this achievement of France, steep and stony, dotted over with a scattered flock of primitive goats. The goat-herd, wild and primitive, caught one and milked it into a bottle for our supper.

We had the goats' milk and couscous at the door of our tent under the white radiance of the moon. We had fallen into the habit of often demanding couscous from the pot of the camel-drivers, it pleased them, and couscous is remarkably good. I hope to find a place somewhere to describe the construction and delights of that dish, but now I have no time, not a moment, for while we were eat-

ing supper the wind awoke, unexpectedly, violently, and suddenly charged down the oued, smiting the tents, the table, the baggage and the ruminative mules. The sky quickly clouded again and soon a flurry of rain passed over the stretched canvas, unmistakably different from the hurtling of fine particles of sand. Rain! We hurried out into the blast to observe this strange phenomenon, forgetting entirely that rain could ever be complained of as a common nuisance. Rain was wonderful, a miracle of Allah. All our Arabs were out in the storm, exulting in it. Ramadan shouted at us above the shout of the wind:

"We have some rain! Good. Good for camel, good for nomad. Good! Good! I show you all thing!"

But it did not turn out to be much of an exhibition. The rain splashed down onto the yellow dust and passed, leaving the ground hardly damp. But the wind kept up its efforts all night, sounding as if, having failed to water the oued, it wanted to tear the bushes out by the roots.

For three days the high massif was swept by the wind, swept as the ocean is by the massed charging of the wind. The rising excitement which we had felt in the sandy hollows came to a climax. We strove and

exulted. There is always exultation in striving. The wind insisted on this aspect of itself, and of youth. Youth may hustle the sand around, blindly headlong, but only youth can move so irresistibly, as though it were driven by a force outside itself, as though it strove for something beyond itself without worrying about flapping tents nor rivers of sand, the leap of the young over probabilities.

Youth is always portrayed on a galloping horse and its mantle streams wide on the wind. Invariably. On the Sahara youth rides a mehari, a tall, swift camel, a long-legged, racing camel. Youth rides the mehari on a little wooden saddle perched high on the hump. The saddle has a peak before and behind with slats nailed across so the peaks look like crosses. Youth steers the mehari with one rein through its nostril and bare feet in the curve of its neck. Youth's brown, clean-cut face is framed in a turban, eyes dark and intent are fixed on a misty horizon, the white mantle streams and magnificently swirls. Youth is a gallant sight on a running mehari. You want to beat up your pack-camel and race after, you want to cheer and let your voice leap ahead.



X

ON the afternoon of the third day we came to the oasis of Ghardaïa. Oases, perhaps, would be better, for there are several towns with their gardens in a shallow valley surrounded by grey bluffs. The wind kicked up such a yellow dust in the eye of heaven that we caught no glimpse, either for encouragement or despair, of minaret or date-palm until we were among them, though the massif gave way to broken hills and we searched the horizon from every rise.

"You see the mosque," Ramdan would say, pointing, but not even the eye of eager faith could see it.

"C'est dommage," he kept repeating.

But we had no energy left to lament the scenery. Superbness was not what we wanted, only quietness after excitement, and

the glimpse of a minaret for promise of it. With the unreasonable optimism of the young we expected the tent not to flap and be full of sand. Optimism was a necessity. You cannot race after the mehari forever, movement must alternate with rest. The aged need seasons of respite in which to gather the harvests of age. For age is the harvester, and I dare nail up, alongside the flaunting banner of the young, the calm, conservative ensign of the old. It is my right to rest sometimes. The wind had scarcely rested day or night for a week. Its energy was unbounded, amazing, and ours was amazing, but not unbounded.

The country around Ghardaïa, the capital of the M'zab, a city of many thousand palms, looked quite barren and was so rough that in some places we felt that we ought to get off the mules and walk—our necks ached too much by that time to ride the camels. It seemed as though the great padded feet of our beasts of burden would be cut to pieces and the grating of the little, unshod hoofs of the mules on the sharp stones actually hurt us. But we found walking almost impossible against that solid wind, though some of the men always had to walk. Ramdan was full of worry, divided between us and the mules.

He insisted that we ride and said that he hoped to get them shod at Ghardaïa. In Touggourt, apparently, horses and mules are never shod.

"Barefoot best for sand," he explained, his brown face haggard with care.

The Mozabites, however, consider the environs of their capital a grazing country. We continually met flocks of goats being driven over the bare rocks or going through the motions of grazing in some desolate hollow while their gaunt shepherds leaned patiently against the wall of the wind. No self-respecting goat with a proper standard of living would even have tried to go through the motions, it would have starved, or turned Bolshevik. The climax of barrenness and roughness was the final descent through a narrow canyon, precipitous, with all the stones underfoot set on edge. The animals stumbled and labored, and the wind rushed at us, shrieking, up the defile.

The canyon led into a oued with a sandy bottom, where soon, rounding a curve, we came to a group of palms and a well with the usual camel drawing water. We dismounted, and the driver hospitably filled the stone troughs for our mules and Tambor who had not been watered for two days. It was a for-

lorn spot, the palms grey and twisting in the wind, the grass in the oasis choked with dust. A few unsmiling children were working in the gardens and a string of women, raggeder than the imagination can conceive if it tries to imagine the raggedest possible woman, walked along bending under immense loads of firewood. At sight of us they put their bundles down and seated themselves in a row on the sand to stare. Their black hair was stiff with grease, and their dark faces, unveiled, were incredibly wrinkled. They belonged to the lowest order of humanity, accepting hardship like the goats. They were dirtier than the western imagination can imagine, either, but they had hoop-earrings and silver necklaces. Ramdan rubbed his hands together and became a showman.

"The gate to Ghardaïa," he said, pointing where the bluffs came close together and the palms marched in a thin line between them. "You take some picture?"

I was sitting on the coping of the well which neither swayed back and forth like the hump of Maybrick, nor jogged up and down like the red saddle of Nina, and I groaned. Taking pictures is the curse of the traveler. Always at the day's end, when you want to enjoy rest after movement, you must take

"some picture," whenever during the day's journey you see a sudden beauty that makes you catch your breath you must stop catching it at once in the interests of "some picture," and you never see the stately passing of a caravan because, instead of looking at it, you must focus a lens and squint into a finder. Nothing can break into the rhythm of anything like "some picture." Taking pictures seems to be a duty, one of those duties which you once imagined were pleasures and which henceforth hold you with the steel grip of habit. I have done my best to rout the habit. I have considered altruism and I realize that nobody is shunned like the person who brings out an album with a hundred or so kodak pictures of a trip. I don't like to be shunned. I have considered lantern slides and lectures. I like to think that people want me to make my pictures into slides and talk about them, but I realize fully that entertainment committees at their wits' end to furnish "some program" must live, and so must the clubs that appoint them, and how can a club live without "some speaker"? I profoundly do not want to take pictures. Surely I could appreciate this remarkable world better if I concentrated upon it instead of taking pictures of it. I began to tell Ramdan that the

air was too full of dust and that there was not enough light, but I could not persevere. His day had been unsuccessful because he had not been able to show us Ghardaïa resplendent in the sun, and this second disappointment filled his dog-like eyes with such lustrous brown sorrow that I lugged myself off the delightfully motionless coping, dug up the graflex from one of Saïd's baskets on the white mule, and shook what sand I could out of it.

The ragged women were willing, for a few sous, to have the evil eye of the ungodly machine leveled at them. They would be willing to bear anything for a few sous, a thought which further depressed me. I didn't like to think that their aboriginal souls might worry afterward about that eye, as is the way with some aboriginal souls, and say extra prayers and buy magic charms. I obediently photographed the well and the camel and the twisting palms and the narrow passage where the bluffs came close together. By the time I had finished there was Embarek holding Nina at my elbow, and the brief resting-space, thoroughly robbed of rest, was over.

We moved on through the passage between the bluffs where the path looked pink like the paths at Guerrara, and ragged men and rag-

geder women—the women always seem raggeder than the men—worked among the palms. The passage opened into the main valley, a oued really, in which the oases of the Ghardaïa group lie. At this point the oued was very wide, almost like a basin, bare in the middle and bordered by steep bluff-like hills over the tops of three of which curved towns, kept from sliding down by their high ramparts. They were white turbans on the heads of the hills, Melika, Benores and Beni-Isguen. Beneath them lay the gardens, bordering with tall columns of palms the bare, flat center of the basin on which, isolated in a whiteness of blowing sand, crouched the black tents of a nomad encampment.

The wind harried the sand everywhere. No glint of sunlight brightened the turbans of the hills or made the belt of tossing palms glitter. The Mozabites, whom we began to meet in great numbers riding their mules, fatter and sleeker than the fat and sleek of Guerrara, and leaner and raggeder, too, than the lean and ragged, for Ghardaïa is a metropolis and a capital where extremes meet, were grey figures struggling through a grey world.

We struggled up the valley around the base of the hill crowned by Melika. The outstand-

ing features of the route were the beggars, wretched men, and one or two women holding starved, naked children. They squatted on the ground in hideous dirt. Misery was born in upon us, and then we rounded the last curve and saw the city itself on a hill which stood alone in the middle of the valley. Ghardaïa covered the whole hill, rising from the level floor in tiers of roofs to the apex, where a tall minaret pointed like a finger at the blurred sky. It was a splendid sight, belying the misery around it as proud capitals do.

In front of the city lay a vast square of beaten-down sand, a parade-ground, along one side of which ran a road bordered by an even line of small, very green trees like the cottonwood, undoubtedly the planting of France. Ramdan turned in between two of these trees and led his procession to the middle of this very public square. There he dismounted from Tambor and came to Charlotte and me, doubt struggling with hope in his eyes.

"Best place," he said. "Clean. No nomad camp here. Best place. No room," and one of his inclusive gestures directed our eyes to the surrounding landscape. In front rose the hill of Ghardaïa, on one side, beyond the tree-bordered avenue, the French military build-

ings climbed the bluff, on the other, bare bluffs, behind, a low wall with sand blown against it and rounding over the top of it. A road led from the wall across a small area of wells and straggling palms to the stony steepness of the hill of Melika. Obviously there was no room anywhere. The wind bounded over Ghardaïa and drove sand against our mummy-like forms.

"Very well," we answered.

We climbed over the wall and sat in the shelter of a ruined well, watching the inhabitants of Melika pass in an apparently endless procession along the road to the public square in which our tent was being pitched—and past the tent, no doubt, in a similar procession—until Sebehe, the hood of his striped gondura drawn over his turban with the peak sticking straight up making him look at least nine feet high, came and, pointing, said "s'ah'h'a."

We never quite grasped the meaning of "s'ah'h'a," it seemed to combine compliment with satisfaction over achievement, as though the raising of the tent were "s'ah'h'a" because it was our tent. The optimism of the word was beyond us at the moment, we were too tired to leap over probabilities any more, but we followed Sebehe and found him right. The tent, flapping though it was under the bom-

bardment of the wind, was "s'ah'h'a," for blessings, like most other things, are comparative. But we had hardly begun to buckle the flap shut against the curiosity of the procession of Melikans when Ramdan intervened. He bowed with deprecating politeness. He asked several times about our comfort and then wanted to know if we did not wish to show our letters to the French commandant!

Pitching tents on the parade-ground might need explanation. They were already firmly pitched there. Charlotte protested with vigor against the presentation of letters, against the pitching of tents, against the world in general. She never entirely succeeded in resigning herself to the will of Allah—a misfortune, because Allah surely is supreme.

We followed Ramdan and Saïd, of course Saïd came along, down the avenue ornamented with French trees and up a flight of innumerable steps to the habitation of the blue uniforms. Inside it the wind did not blow, nor did the walls flap, compensations I tried to point out. On the strength of them I took off my goggles and unwound my face, but Charlotte remained obstinate. I began to point out further that a protesting self is more fatiguing to drag around than a mere self when, luckily, the officer appeared.

He was produced by an imposing Arab in a blue burnous. There were several other blue burnouses about, equally magnificent, and quite a number of blue uniforms. The buildings were imposing too, for Ghardaïa, as befits its size, is an important military station. The commandant was very military, short, crisp, and to the point.

"Do you want lodging?" he inquired.

"No."

"Do you want food?"

"No."

"Wine?"

"No. We have all thing."

"Entertainment? A guide?"

"No."

He smiled at us shortly and crisply.

"I hope you will enjoy your stay at Ghardaïa. I trust you will find everything you wish."

He shook hands shortly and crisply, bowed with military precision, and the interview was unmistakably at an end.

We departed, but not to the tent that was "s'ah'h'a." Saïd carried a basket on his arm and wished to visit the souk. We would have preferred to have him open a can or two and put his mind immediately on cooking the dinner, but Allah is supreme. We followed

the men around the outside of Ghardaïa and then, entering it, up a short street past the café where the Ouled Nails would dance that night and into the market place, a vast, white square surrounded by arcades. As usual it swarmed. Men and boys and camels and asses jostled us. Firewood was for sale, and grain, and burnouses and shoes and daggers. There were baskets of vegetables on the ground, being walked around and over, carrots, onions and lettuce. Saïd would stop and bargain, and whenever he stopped the crowd pressed densely upon us. We had never encountered so many Arabs before, nor such curious ones, and there was no inspiring blue uniform to open a path.

Some of these men were hard-featured, some had cruel faces, some had eyes and mouths set in unutterable wretchedness. Many of the children had running, sore eyes, and we saw the blind being led by the hand. Bundles of rags crowded upon us, so filthy that their nearness made us shiver. We tried to keep our eyes on the dirty green vegetables, we had to keep them there. Misery jostled and stared, mixed with round, fat sleekness. Nothing can be sleeker or more dignified in prosperity than a well-to-do Arab in a whole gondura draped with several burnouses. He

is portly, stately, magnificent, but for some reason—who can protect himself against the unruly excursions of the mind?—misery more than anything else stamped itself on my imagination in the dust-filled souk of Ghardaïa. It was the ancient misery, Biblical misery, and I felt that no description of Lazarus has ever been adequate.

I am not going to attempt one. It is not quite fair to present Ghardaïa as the awful example, the souks are all alike. The “stench Arabe,” as Charlotte called it, an indescribably sickening smell, is thick in all of them. We saw unspeakable dirt and misery in Guerara, in Touggourt, in Biskra, everywhere. Perhaps the effect on me was cumulative, for when you see the same thing enough times you begin to notice it, or perhaps Ghardaïa’s size made misery impressive as the lower east side of New York is more impressive than the slums of a village.

A blind boy I shuddered at the thought of touching tugged at my burnous. The Bible is full of the blind, you are continually being exhorted to give alms to them. They no longer stagger through civilized streets, you are not aware of them as a large, wretched class and you think, if you think about it at all, that this Biblical enumeration of the blind with the

fatherless and the widow is for poetical impressiveness. Ramdan seized the boy and thrust him away into the crowd. He swung his arms and cried "Râh! Râh!" hoarsely and sharply, and the people fell back a little. I looked up desperately and saw the flash of Larabie's white teeth—where did he come from? And there was Bubeker's sweet, inwardly intent smile reminding me of beautiful, quiet spaces, and bow-legged Embarek in his shabby blue overcoat that he was proud of because he wore it as a "travailleur" in the army of "la belle France." Almost I could hear him say again "France est belle." They closed around us, our vigilant bodyguard, always faithful, always on hand, and we felt saved.

Larabie spoke to Ramdan who translated:

"The men have no couscous. But we go home—chez nous. I come again."

No, indeed, for we felt saved. No, by all means let us buy couscous!

We proceeded in a solid phalanx into a narrow street. The day was waning fast and the alley was full of grey dusk. Two little girls sat in a dark doorway, immense earrings showing through their greasy hair, flies biting the red rims of their eyes, playing a game in the dust. I looked away from them. We

passed a woman who pressed herself against the wall, drawing her haïk even more closely over her face and slinking by with averted head. I looked away from her too, but it occurred to me that the helplessness of a widow in a country where women had to slink was no poetical figure either.

We came to a shop, open across the front, a dark hole in which a fat Arab in a blue embroidered vest sat behind a counter set some four feet back from the street. Charlotte and I entered the booth with Ramdan while our four men stood in a row across the front keeping back the crowd. The street was densely packed with men who had followed us from the souk and others who came out of every doorway. The shop floor was raised a little so we could look over the heads of our bodyguard into the upturned faces. The merchant produced the couscous, coarse, white grains like farina, and the bargaining began. Some of the onlookers tried to take part in it, but were frowned down. Some reached over the shoulders of the guard, holding out daggers and embroidered, black shawls for us to buy. Larabie and Company thrust them violently back, objurgating them with explosive consonants. The hubbub increased every minute. The voices of Ramdan and the

merchant, haggling, wrangling finally, cut through the general noise. In the end, it seemed a long time, a very small package was handed across the counter, so amazingly small that I had to comment on it.

"Enough for to-night," Ramdan said, wearing the harried look he had had when he worried about the mules' feet. "I come to-morrow. I find other shop. He see you are strange-men. He want too much."

They all wanted too much. Charlotte made the mistake, as we ploughed our way back through the souk, of noticing one of the shawls. It was rather noticeable, a red and yellow mosque embroidered on a black background. At once shawls appeared magically on all sides, we progressed through an avenue of shawls. And every vendor wanted too much. Ramdan said so. He was excitedly earnest. He kept repeating:

"You see one you like. I come again. I buy it."

We were beyond seeing which one we liked. We could only follow in the wake of Ramdan's "Râh! Râh!" and "Emchi, Emchi!"

XI

MELIKA in the sun, and Benores, Beni-Isguen and Ghardaïa resplendent! At last Ramdan was able to exhibit them on a windless, clear day. It was the day of the purchase, finally, of the red and yellow mosque, of unlimited, properly priced couscous, of cigarettes, Algerian only, in white paper packages labeled "Jobs," of more beans and lettuce and onions and some strange brown nuts for flavoring. All the blankets were shaken and aired—in the public square—all the furniture dusted, all the boxes unpacked and emptied of sand, all the clothes washed. By afternoon the whole caravan was dressed in shining white, brilliant, beautiful, except Saïd who never could achieve cleanliness all at once. He had neglected his turban this time.

In the sunshine the souk was a kaleidoscope of brightness surrounded by dark-blue shadows under the arcades. The white walls glistened blindingly against the pure azure of the

sky. The same brown faces crowded around us, but now they all seemed to be smiling with displays of remarkably beautiful teeth. Two Arab boys attached themselves to us as guides and led us through crooked streets, full of the "stench Arabe" but lovely with unexpected angles, carved, age-blackened doors and blue shadows, up the hill to the ancient mosque, reported to be over six hundred years old. It had a small courtyard, full of quiet sunlight, around the four sides of which ran a corridor whose dim ceiling was supported by posts of dark, mellow wood. Three voluminous Arabs sat in the shade on straw mats, their heads bowed, their eyes glazed with hypnotic meditation. They did not even notice us. As we entered the courtyard the chattering of the two boys was hushed, Ramdan and Saïd and Larabie—we had had husky Sebehe and warlike Embarek also in the souk but three seemed to be considered a sufficient bodyguard for the mosque—walked humbly. The noise of the town was a far-off musical sweetness, the peace of Allah, brooding unbrokenly for six hundred years, seemed tangible.

We walked carefully on the matting which protected the sacred stones of the corridor, and up a dark, winding stairway onto the roof. It was flat like all Ghardaïa's roofs which led

like giant steps down the hill on every side. In spite of the narrow, dark-blue canyons of the streets we felt that we could walk all over the town on its bright roofs, jumping from one level to the next.

Groups of women, wearing dark shawls like those which had been offered us in the souk, sat in the strips of shade beside the white parapets of some of the roofs. They scattered at sight of us like frightened chickens, and we wondered how it would feel to live all your life in terror of a strange burnous. There are a great many burnouses. We inquired about harems. Ramdan said there were none. We inquired about wives, Mohammed explicitly permitting four "and no more." He shook his head. "One wife," he said, "we are civilized."

The Koran describes "*la bonne femme*": "Men shall have preëminence above women, because of those advantages wherein God hath caused the one of them to excel the other, and for that which they expend of their substance in maintaining their wives. The honest women are obedient, careful in the absence of their husbands, for that God preserveth them, by committing them to the care and protection of the men. But those, whose perverseness ye shall be apprehensive of, rebuke; and remove them into separate apartments, and chastise them."

But Mohammed seems to have esteemed her. He devotes pages to exhortations about dealing justly with her. The inheritance of a man shall be twice that of a woman, but her share shall be given her and her dowry, "and unto those who are divorced, a reasonable provision is also due; this is a duty incumbent on those who fear God." Such a remark as, "Respect women who have borne you, for God is watching over you," was probably quite revolutionary, and also: "If ye hate them, it may happen that ye may hate a thing wherein God has placed much good." Mohammed affirms that God will deal justly with women and admit them into paradise, but just what position they will occupy in the dwelling place of the black-eyed "hur al oyem" whose bodies are made of pure musk, is not quite clear. It is reported that when an old woman besought Mohammed to intercede for her that she might be admitted into paradise he answered that no old woman could enter there. But her weeping softened his heart, so he added that God would make her young again.

Evidently the eligibility of women for Heaven was a hotly debated question, like their admission into politics in this later day, for Mohammed found it necessary explicitly to include them:

“Their Lord therefore answered them, saying, I will not suffer the work among you of him who worketh to be lost, whether he be male, or female: the one of you is from the other . . . but whoso doth good works, whether he be male or female, and is a true believer; they shall be admitted into paradise, and shall not in the least be unjustly dealt with.”

Two minutes after our appearance on top of the mosque not a woman was left on any of the bright roofs leading down into the valley. Palms glistened along the steep bluffs which seemed to meet behind the hill that stood alone with the city upon it, and on the other side we looked down upon the tree-bordered parade-ground where our tents were dark spots on yellow sand. Beyond that the white walls of Melika were picked out with blue shadows like the blue in the folds of Larabie's newly washed turban. The town cast a shadow along the top of its hill like the shadow Larabie's turban cast on his forehead. The brown hill itself was like Larabie's brown face, shining in the sun like his eyes, and cut by a road as dazzlingly white as his teeth.

Melika itself, whither we went also, climbing the dazzling road in company with the asses of the Melikans, commanded an even finer view than the roof of Ghardaïa's mosque.

The streets of Melika were twistingly picturesque, it had no noisy souk, its inhabitants did not crowd upon us. Ramdan kept explaining that the town was "sanct, you know, sanct," until we grasped that Melika was some kind of a holy city.

"Nobody drink, nobody smoke, everybody know some Koran," he explained, relieved by our comprehension.

A path ran around the town outside the wall and at one end lay a huge cemetery, most of the graves built up with stones because the hilltop was too hard to dig them down. It was Thursday evening, the eve of Friday, the holy day, and already a few women, shapeless in their all-enveloping shawls, walked among the graves. All over Algeria Friday is the day when the women visit the cemeteries, apparently their only outing, their sole dissipation. We did not enter the cemetery because of them. The Arab men do not, they grant them the privilege of Fridays, and in our burnouses we might as well have been men.

Although it was not yet Friday the whole "sanct" town was beginning its celebration. A large, flat inclosure at the edge of the cemetery was half full of praying men, and a group of women, closely veiled, were preparing to make couscous.



"They all begin now," Ramdan said, "they make couscous, they make some prayer. They stay all night."

The declining sun mellowed the whiteness of the inclosure to a rosy yellow and splashed the white clothes of the praying men with golden tints. This sunset was not gorgeous like the one at Guerrara, but was the usual cool, pure ending of day. The cool sunsets of the Sahara are hard to describe because often gold and purple and crimson are in the sky, and when you name such colors you give the effect of gorgeousness. They are tints rather than colors, ethereal, indescribable, not like the unquestionable gold and purple and crimson of sunsets on the deserts of the American west. Yet the colors are not questionable, nor does "pale" exactly describe them, crimson is not washed out into pink nor gold into yellow, they remain delicate versions of crimson and gold, spreading over the vast sky and the vast earth beneath it. The sunsets, like the dawns, match the Sahara, for the Sahara is not dramatic—gorgeous is a dramatic word—like the American deserts, cut everywhere as they are by deep valleys and precipitous mountains, nor has it as much variety of color in soil or rocks. In our barren lands—they are veritable deserts and so are comparable—you

have a sense of drama, action, colorful action and your mind dwells on prehistoric upheavals and the earth's future. The Sahara is subtly tinted, her characteristics are vastness, endlessness, sameness. She inclines you to dwell upon eternity rather than on anything so incidental as the earth.

The white towns of the Arabs, their white clothes, the monotony of their lives, their resistance to change, their concentration on the life beyond this world, reflect vast, level deserts. They express slow, even rhythms, accelerating a little sometimes, eddying a little like sharp accents breaking from an unexplainable, hidden excitement; but the excitement in the idea of eternity is unexplainable, like the excitement in the monotonous beating of the tom-tom. The life of an Arab town, its continuous movement without change, is exactly like the tom-tom. The Arabs seem to be hypnotized into an active trance. A town like Melika, just like it, might have existed two thousand years ago, four thousand, six thousand, any time. In all its essentials, it would have been "just same."

We did not visit Benores and Beni-Isguen. Although they were not "sanct" Ramdan assured us that they were "just same," and their appearance, bending over the brown

foreheads of the hills, bore out his words. While camping in the public parade-ground of four towns was an interesting experience, it was not one to prolong indefinitely, so on another gala day of the sun Embarek and Sebehe knocked out the tent-pegs while groups of interested Mozabites stood around, and Ramdan introduced a friend of his from Kabylie who taught in a French school, an alert youth with fluent French. All our conversations with Arabs, Ramdan was always introducing them, were "just same." We would praise his native land, usually Kabylie, and describe America, he would inquire about our fatigue and compliment us on our prowess, and then words would fail on both sides. We were interested in this Arab who taught in a French school and Ramdan explained proudly that many Kabyles held such positions because the Kabyles are a remarkably intelligent and good people.

The valley, or oued, between the steep bluffs crowned by Melika, Benores and Beni-Isguen, with the separate hill of Ghardaïa in its midst, winds toward the south and our route lay along its bed. After two hours of swaying back and forth on the camels we passed the town where Ramdan's friend taught, a town spilling over the bluff, all radiant in the sun,

whose name we can by no means remember. All the way there both sides of the oued were fringed with palms, wells and mud huts. The gardens of the nameless town were a shining little oasis, a bright green spot on the surrounding bare pinkness, surmounted by glistening white walls. It was "just same."

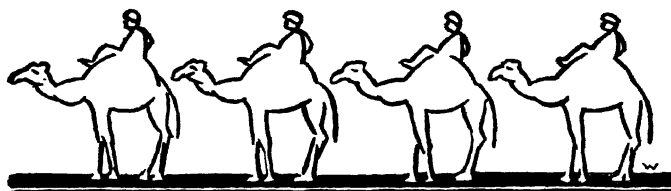
The oued gradually widened and became sandier, the palms along its edges became fewer, became small isolated groups, became single trees. We ceased to meet anyone. We traversed an empty space, bare even of bushes, the bluffs growing lower on either side, until at noon we came to the last oasis of the Ghar-daïa group, small and straggling, with a small and straggling town, by a large dike of sand some fourteen to twenty feet high. We climbed upon its top and lunched under the last palms. On each side of us was a well, one with a camel, the other with a mule with bandaged eyes, walking up and down. The drivers stared at us and shook hands. The pulleys squeaked. The wells were just like all the other wells.

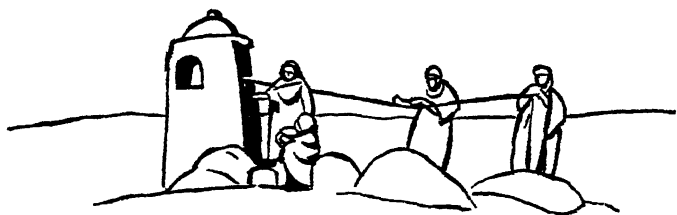
It would have been a charming and restful occasion had not Saïd had something the matter with him. He sulked by himself and refused to give the men any lunch. So Ramadan did it. Possibly the prospect beyond the

dam depressed Saïd. The oued, now only very vaguely marked by low, discontinuous hills, was full of sand drifted into small dunes. The landscape seemed to be varied, yet it had no outstanding features, the eye was caught by nothing, an indiscriminate, soft heaving, over which the sunlight shimmered making it dazzling and more vague.

Ramdan pointed at this landscape with an inclusive gesture and a glance at the disgruntled cook-man.

"We go on desert," he said, "a week to Ouargla."





XII

THE evening of the second day, no water until then, brought us to the well and bordj of Zelfana. A bordj is a rest-house for travelers, four bare walls standing by a well, a refuge for both man and beast, they huddle in it together, from the furious winds and deadly cold. Yes, the cold. The great, grey massifs around Ghardaïa can be deadly cold. No Arab seems to know that the desert is cold, they never build fires to warm themselves. The desert is supposed to be hot. And it is. You can be so hot and so cold on the same day that you cannot decide whether heat prostration or freezing would be the worse death.

The way to Zelfana was mostly hot, along the bottoms of sandy oueds, but the last stretch over a bit of the stony massif was utterly cold. We stood with chattering teeth around the well, a grand well with a cement hood over it. There was no wind, another instance of good fortune, for Zelfana was in a oued full of

small orange-colored sand-dunes. Unclouded sunlight poured over us and the dunes, making them look like piled up grains of yellow gold. The bordj stood on a small rock-promontory with three palm trees in the sand below, and behind it was a stone hut where dwelt the guardian of the well with his wife and five children. He came running at sight of us and drew water. He apologized for having no goats, he was a "poor man," but he had a rich cousin, a "nomad-man," who was camped about three kilometers away and he would go and get some milk. Nothing could restrain him from this hospitality.

While camp was being made Charlotte and I walked about briskly to keep warm, accompanied by the five children. They were pathetically small and thin, bare-armed and bare-legged, five little moving rag-heaps in tattered burnouses made of old sacks. Their small gravity was engaging, and we liked them too because they did not have sore eyes. Under their guidance we visited the three palms with sand blown halfway up their trunks and completely choking what had once been the well which nourished them. Beyond this ruined garden the oued widened, and looking across it over the orange-colored dunes was like looking across a river full of arrested golden waves.

Our tattered guides next led us onto the promontory and insisted on showing us the bordj, very cold inside. They explained by signs about the iron rings where you are supposed to tie your mules and the stone stove where you are supposed to cook and the place where you are supposed to sleep, watching us gravely to see if we understood, delighted when we did. Then they invited us with gravely emphatic signs to call on their mother.

She came, smiling, out of her dark cave of a hut. She had adorned herself for the occasion. She must have, for she was loaded with jewelry, immense round earrings, a heavy necklace of rough coral chunks and loops of silver chain, a necklace of coins, a necklace of beads, and her arms were covered with silver bracelets. Over her dark head she wore a red scarf which fell about her almost covering her.

We admired her ornaments, she told us the names of her children, and the conversational possibilities were exhausted. We stood staring at one another, staring and touching hands across the ages. She was a "nomad-woman" by blood, the daughter of a race that has always lived that simple life close to nature which is so much lauded in this day. Charlotte and I believe in that life. We like to live

in tents and be primitive—we prefer a much more primitive living in tents than we found in our caravan on the Sahara—and we stood staring at the “nomad-woman” who had never been anything but close to nature.

She was a dazzling sight in the sun before her kennel, you could not call the hut anything but a squalid, dirty kennel. Splendor like hers in a kennel is barbaric, it indicates a state of mind which cannot think what has not always been thought and therefore cannot choose. What mother who could think and choose would be decked in coral and silver in the midst of five hungry children? They were chronically hungry. She loved them, evidently, was proud of them, but just as evidently—words are not always necessary for the conveyance of feeling—their conditions and her condition and her man’s in his hampering burnous were the will of Allah not to be gainsaid. She must have been younger than we were, yet her face was that of an aged hag. Life was hardship, poverty was fate. With stolid obstinacy would she resist any new idea. You can find barbarism in all civilized countries, bedecked, its characteristics stolid faces and eyes with no glint in them. We are leavened with it, but all races that have never escaped from nature seem to consist of it.

Their state is one of hopelessness varied by fear and the effort to propitiate the fearful by amulets and superstitious rites.

This is an arresting thought to "back to nature" advocates, and when you are one and keep meeting the nomad it arrests you. You ask yourself what connection there is between Thoreau, one of the greatest advocates of the simple life, so simple that he would not even put salt in his food, and a "nomad-woman," and you have to conclude that there is none. You have to conclude—if you have the courage to speculate about it, for you need courage to look at a fact which threatens to upset your pet theory—that either you are a fool and Thoreau was one, or that the civilized human mind brings something back to nature. It is nature's child and nature is a domineering, terrific parent, a fearful parent. She is the universe so how can she help that? She dominates, and if the child stays meekly at home forever she will dominate it forever. It has to break away, leave home, race its mehari furiously, rebel, assert itself, fight her and think it wins, and then it can, having become a man, return home and appreciate its mother.

"You are fearful," it can say, "but you are wonderful."

We returned thoughtfully to the red carpet

beside our round tent. While the world is full of foolish mothers some are very wise. We should have liked to meditate further on what the human mind brings back to nature, we felt that we needed to find good reasons why our love of tents was not merely an undesirable atavism, but there was no opportunity that evening. Great activity prevailed in the camp partly because of the cold and partly because of the prospect of unusually gorgeous couscous, for the rich nomad cousin had sent, besides milk, a black, shiny goat to be bargained for. The clash of excited voices rose into the clear air. Everybody mauled and pinched the goat, a very meek goat, and as soon as the bargain was concluded they slaughtered it. We retired into the tent though we realized that advocates of looking at every aspect of things should not have flinched at this aspect of couscous.

Couscous, however, is very beguiling, and as it must be cooked over a fire this chilly evening seemed a suitable time for us to sit in the circle of camel-drivers and observe the culinary process. As usual they had made a semi-circle of the baggage and sat with their backs against it facing their fire. It was a very little fire, you held your hands over it to warm them and were grateful. The smoke of

it rose straight up into the pure radiance of the sunset sky.

Bubeker poured the couscous into a milk pan and washed it for a long time, kneading it with his long, delicate-looking hands, solemnly, as though he were performing a ceremony. We wondered if he was. He was our holiest man and he always washed the couscous. Meanwhile a stew of goat's meat, carrots, onions, and a few of the strange brown nuts which we had insisted on Saïd's buying, boiled in a copper kettle over the little fire, sending up with the smoke a delectably odorous steam. Bubeker drained the couscous and put it into a conical basket of native weave which he then placed in the top of the iron pot. There followed twenty minutes of boiling and bubbling during which Embarek came and played on his wooden flute while Larabie intoned a mournful chant whose falling cadences belied the flash of his smile. Then the couscous was poured out into the milk pan again, the meat and vegetables disposed on top of it, the soup poured over for a sauce, and the men fell to.

Our portion was served to us in our tent after the "somba." Couscous is a whole meal for an Arab, yet we never could persuade Saïd that it was a whole meal for us. We were

"strange-men" who ate their food in courses, unaccountably, and courses we must have. He served the goat's meat, very tough, in another form after the couscous, and then a salad, a bit sad from traveling for two days in his boxes, and dates for dessert. We managed to insist on dates always, but we could only get the rest of the "cuisine Arabe" occasionally, as Saïd could not believe that we liked the bread which Abdulla kneaded of coarse brownish flour and baked on an iron griddle, or the thick sweet coffee, or the tea flavored with mint. His unbelief made us wonder about the attitude of other travelers whom he had cooked for and about that attribute of the human mind which hates anything new. It pays to try any new thing at least once because every now and then one of them turns out to be as fascinating as eating couscous and dates in the twilight of the orange sands while the Koran is being chanted to the beat of the tom-tom.

We appreciated Zelfana, but not enough. Nobody ever really appreciates the oases in the monotony of his Sahara except in retrospect. We thought that we had experienced monotony in the swaying of the camels and the beating of the tom-tom and the just-sameness of everything, but after the sands of Zel-

fana we climbed permanently out of the oueds and rode day after day over the grey, stony massif. It was almost colorless, almost flat, bare save for occasional grey bushes, an infinite sameness across which our eyes strained toward a hard and illusionless horizon. Monotony, which had merely glanced at us before, stared with an unwinking eye. Neither the clean high space nor the sparkling air nor the unbroken, pale, yet deep, blue arch of the sky could mitigate that stare.

The sun blazed continuously, dazzling us and sometimes sending a heat shimmer over the hard surface like running white waves. We would wake up then from the hypnotic lethargy of swaying back and forth and look for the magical mingling of the earth and sky which is the compensation for sameness, but the little waves remained only little waves or else they looked like low white smoke. The sun was not too hot, nor were we afflicted by cold, nor did the wind ever assail us. Nothing either pleasant or unpleasant happened. Somewhere I have made a remark about intervals when you seem to go on endlessly among ugly things and the little heights you set your heart upon are disappointments—at least you can have an emotion about an ugly thing, and hope is an emotion and so is dis-

appointment. The massif presented no ugly things, only colorless ones, no brutalities, only illusionlessness, and there were no little heights at all. You could not even be disappointed. You could have no emotions whatever.

Monotony was somehow greatly enhanced by the line of telegraph poles, part of the French military route from Ghardaïa to Ouargla, which we followed after the afternoon of the third day. They reached off in a perfectly straight line and vanished in a white distance. They always did that no matter how long we traveled or how much we ached from swaying. Always and always they vanished in the same white distance. There cannot possibly be an illusion about a line of telegraph poles. It is almost more than you can do not to count them, and what can be more futile than counting poles and losing count and beginning all over again? I tried to concentrate my attention on the labor of setting them up, on the enterprise of France, on the future of the massif, on the silent ages of its past, on anything, but I could not. A telegraph pole is a fact, a known, illusionless fact. I counted facts, nothing but facts. The massif was a fact, its size was a fact, the certainty that if you did not fall by

the wayside you would get to a well was a fact, Ouargla was a fact. Ouargla could not even stir my curiosity, it would be "just same."

When we camped by the telegraph poles I continued to count them. When the stars came out, big and bright as they always are over deserts, I thought scientifically of the distances between them and between the nearest one and the earth and how long it takes for their light to reach us. My imagination was not stirred by the magnificence of such magnitude, it was crushed by it, killed. There was splendid Orion. Orion was an aggregation of facts. It was a pleasant fancy but childish to imagine a warrior with a belt.

Fancies! I tried desperately to have a few, but they did me no good, for I saw only facts and how the mirage was a calculable fact. One afternoon a kind of mirage glistened near the vanishing point of the telegraph poles.

"That is a curious appearance over there," I said to Charlotte.

"No good," she answered laconically and wrapped up her face some more.

But I had to have a few fancies or I should go mad. I tried for hours to yield to the even swing of Maybrick's stride and feel again the rhythm of great spaces. How was this stony

monotony any different from a sandy one? Why could I not be full of happy assurances, ridiculously omniscient? Once I had believed that I could, but never in my life have I met anything as destructive to beliefs as that line of telegraph poles. They were not even frightful, you could have no fun being proud of yourself, because they were so eminently safe and sane. They were so sensible, they jeered at fancies, they efficiently supported the wire to Ouargla and that was all there was to it. My oppressed nerves wanted to yell. It took all my self-control and all the reasonableness of my reason not to shout "Brek djemmel" and lie down on the grey stones refusing ever to go another step.

We only followed the poles for three days and a half, an eternity nevertheless. The time that registers itself on the heart has not much to do with solar time. Clocks may tick on monotonously for an hour, but you know that it wasn't an hour at all, it may have been a second or it may have been more like a year.

After a year the stony plateau broke into ridges and little conical hills. We had come to the eastern edge of the massif and were about to descend into the same vast area of sand from which we had ascended after leaving Lalea. The edge was like the shore of a

sea, probably in some prehistoric age it was the shore of a veritable, wet sea. From the last ridge we looked out over endless sand and saw Ouargla, surprisingly not "just same," not on a hill but flat on the plain, only a minaret showing above the embrace of thousands of palms, an emerald set in gold. The setting was enameled with delicate colors, blue, rose, lavender, and shimmered beyond the blinding whiteness of an immense dry lake or chott, which blazed with the light and heat of the sun. The chott lay at our feet and the emerald on the far side of it seemed to be floating rather than solidly set in the enameled gold. The colored sands, rising in little dunes and ridges full of shadows, mingled with the sky in a pale, indeterminate line.

We descended to the sandy shore of the chott, set with sparse palms whose straight, slim shadows made a blue pattern on the sand, past a ruined village on a small eminence and out onto the blazing whiteness of the chott itself. A road crossed it, a causeway built up two or three feet above the surrounding bog upon which, at that season, blue pools of real water gleamed here and there. The causeway was as white as the surface of the chott, everywhere heat and light radiated upward. The shores swam in silver heat-waves, a

mobile shining varied by bits of bright mirage. It took perhaps an hour to cross, a dazzlingly bright hour, oppressively hot. By the time we reached the middle of the causeway the animals were hanging down their heads, and the men had drained the canteens.

The shore, when we came to it at last, was sandy and set with palms through which we quickly reached the gardens of the oasis. They were more tropical than any we had seen, densely green, full of moist heat and swarms of gnats. We had begun to meet the Tuaregs driving camels along the strange highway across the chott, a people less prosperous-looking than the Mozabites and swarthier. We now saw them working in the gardens and one of them attached himself to us, the inevitable, self-appointed guide. He led us to several camping places in areas of coarse, dusty grass outside some garden wall where a well would supply us with water, but Charlotte firmly refused them all. The instant we stopped moving the gnats settled upon us in clouds, and the moist heat in the thick vegetation was stifling.

I admired Charlotte tremendously for I had reached a point of weariness beyond the possibility of protests. She looked firmly into Ramdan's worried eyes and refused to stop,

the first time that either of us had firmly refused anything. She insisted that the camp must be comfortable and restful. She kept on insisting, she paid no attention to Embarek's conspicuous mopping of his shining forehead nor to the dimming of Larabie's smile, and insisted finally that we go past the town and beyond the gardens—no matter how far they extended—onto the sand. An anxious consultation in Arabic followed this ultimatum, and then the self-appointed one trudged on, Charlotte riding after him on Bichet, militantly, and the rest of us following meekly.

After an age or two of winding among hot, moist gardens we came to the white wall of Ouargla pierced by rectangular gates, dark holes narrowing at the top like Egyptian doorways. A white road led around the wall outside the town, between its brightness and the rank, green darkness of the gardens. People went in and out of the gates, stopping to stare at us, many of them with features of a pronounced negro type. The road circled the town and we found to our comfort that its far side was not surrounded by gardens. The gates led directly onto a sandy plain varied by little mounds and small groups of palms.

About half a kilometer away stood the formal buildings of the French government,

modern buildings, connected by a narrow-gauge tramway with the primitive Tuareg town. As we rounded the last angle of the wall the tram was starting, a gay affair, a light open car covered by a white canvas canopy with fluttering edges, and drawn by a mule with a bell around its neck. The sight of it cheered us, and there was a group of half-grown girls in gay rags, the sun glancing gayly on their silver necklaces. The sandy plain sparkled. The far-off, formal buildings glistened. The isolated groups of two or three palms, slim upright lines grateful to the eye in a world which inclined to be always horizontal, held gayly flashing plumes toward the sun. Here and there a little rise of ground was crowned by a kouba, the small domed buildings which are the tombs of marabouts and therefore shrines. They glistened too, rosily, in the clear light of the late afternoon. A breeze, not felt before, cooled us, promising relief from gnats and tropical dampness. Our spirits rose.

The guide turned off at right angles to the tram and led us some distance, perhaps half a mile, into the radiant plain. Then he stopped in the center of nowhere, expectantly. Ramdan dismounted and approached Charlotte. She retained her militant air. She was severely judicious.

"Where is the water?" she demanded. "We need much water," and then to me, belligerently, as though I had objected, "We are going to have three baths every day."

I murmured something about the Vanderbilt Hotel, but not very loudly. There was another Arabic consultation and then Ramadan pointed at what looked like a garden on the right, a patch of dense, dark shade with a mud wall around it, not far away. Charlotte continued to be stern. She surveyed the whole horizon, slowly turning her mule around. There was the faint pink line of the distant bluff of the massif with a shining beneath it which could only be some part of the chott, there was clean sand reaching to the sky, there were the glistening koubas and the groups of straight, slim palms, there was Ouargla, all orange-rose with its two tall minarets and its wall flanked with massed green shade, there was the sky of pure, pale yet deep blue. I sincerely hoped that she would like what she saw. There was not a gnat, there was hardly even a strange Arab in sight. She slowly completed the circle and pronounced a gracious "s'ah'h'a."

XIII

NOW it chanced that there was to be a "biggen fête" at Ouargla. Ramadan came back from town where he had gone to buy couscous with news of it. On the following Monday, four days off, "all Arab, all rices-camel come in from desert," there would be horse races and camel races and dancing in the market. "All people come, they make fête. You know, fête. Biggen fête."

And the occasion of the fête? We should have had trouble in grasping the occasion had we not heard in Algiers about the Citröen automobiles, light cars with caterpillar wheels, which were attempting to cross the Sahara from Touggourt to Timbuctoo. Now they had accomplished the journey and were coming out of the immense waste, the southern part of which is almost without water, the "land of the great thirst."

Nobody can deny that we are fortunate travelers. We had not known that the cars

were returning and certainly not that they would go through Ouargla on a particular Monday, and even had we known it how could we know that "all Arab and all rices-camel" would come in "from desert"?

"We stay?" Anxiety was in the question and eager anxiety in the brown faces of the men who crowded behind Ramdan when he asked it.

A "rices-camel" is a racing camel, a mehari, irresistible word, and the white Arabian horses would gallop while their riders in wildly streaming garments would shoot off their long guns. We dispensed happiness in a gentle "yes," and made it paradisiacal by a distribution of boxes of "Jobs" with chocolate bars for Bubeker.

The four days of waiting for the festival—you always wait for something on deserts—passed dreamingly as days on deserts should. They were mainly devoted to the red carpet with brief visits to the town whose interior proved to be "just same," a visit to the French captain in the impressively formal building, and walks in the coolness of the mornings and evenings. We felt as though the massif had been a strange wandering from which we had come home. The environs of Ouargla looked as the Sahara ought to look, as the picture-

books say that she looks, slightly rolling sand, palms, an oasis, caravans of camels passing not too close to camp, a silver chott, blue sky. And the bright air, the joyous lift of the morning, the torpor of dry heat inducing slumber at midday, the sparkling serenity of afternoon, the cool magicalness of night, were as they should be.

In the blue starry nights candles were lighted in the koubas, offerings at the shrines of the marabouts like the candles burned before the images of saints in Catholic churches, and the offerers "make some prayer." Very faintly the beating of the tom-tom came from the walled town, all the softer strokes lost, only a throbbing like a heart beating, the humanness of Ouargla throbbing through the everlasting sameness it finds itself set in.

Listening to the tom-tom becomes a fascination. The tom-tom is in the first rank of musical instruments. It can be made to express anything through the even monotony of its beat. It can accompany the Koran, it can carry a love-song, a dirge, a ballad of high daring. It can be tragic. It can be militant. It can depress you with the dull hopelessness of reiteration, worse than a hundred million telegraph poles. It can be utterly restful like the throbbing that came through the blue

nights from Ouargla. It can fill you with the joy of great spaces, making you want to cry with the Psalmist: "Let the Heavens be glad and let the earth rejoice." In the hands of a skillful Arab it is a perfect interpretation of all the phases of the desert, it is the desert, yet all the time it is just an accompaniment, just a background for the mirage of yourself.

Ourselves were full of mirage. It is hard to recollect the incidents of those quiet days, they merged together in the sunlight like the features of the landscape at noonday, gilded with a secure and bright tranquillity.

One incident was Saïd's shopping. He used the modern method of advertising but without placards, without noise, just the word running through the neighborhood like a wave running up a sandy beach. He advertised for eggs and every little while an Arab would steal up to the cook-tent and produce from some recess beneath his burnous one, two, or three eggs. He would hand them across the barricade of boxes and have crumpled bits of paper handed back. It was always a silent transaction, so unlike the usual business methods of the Arabs that it partook of mystery. A chicken arrived in the same way, and occasional handfuls of onions, a few carrots, a bunch of parsley, a bit of mint for our tea.

It occurred to me that I might use the same method of acquiring some of the native jewelry which I had long desired. I suggested that Ramdan advertise. He did so as a matter of course, inquiring only whether the jewelry should be brought to us or we would go to it. We elected to go to it, and presently were informed that the exhibit was ready.

In the coolness of afternoon we traversed the half mile of glittering sand between our tents and the rose-orange wall of Ouargla. Outside the main rampart we entered an oblong plaza surrounded by low buildings which had to do with France, and then passed through a gate into the market. The streets were the usual narrow, dirty alleys. There were archways across them, and sudden picturesque corners, and a well or two, and the round, plumed tops of palms casting spots of unexpected shade.

We stopped before a mud wall in a street no different from the others to visit the convent-school of the White Sisters, a French Catholic order which wears white robes and large flat straw hats. There is a corresponding order of White Brothers, one of whose representatives we had seen in a little open square directing the play of a group of Tuareg boys, a big man in a white cassock with a black

rosary and a squat black hat. We were admitted through a low door in the mud wall to a yard and thence into a small reception-room furnished in the style of France. The Sister Superior came, a calm and lovely person with whom we could converse a little. She showed us the school room for Tuareg girls and the looms whereon they are taught to weave rugs and woolen and cotton scarfs. Some of the workmanship was of a high order but the designs were borrowed from everywhere, Persian, Assyrian, Moorish.

The Arab, at least the Arab in Africa, seems to produce no art of his own, his mosques, his rugs, his implements are a hodgepodge of foreignness. If the Tuaregs had any native art we did not discover it. We saw a few baskets of a crudeness which the American Indians would despise, and some pottery without ornament, very roughly modeled, with no distinctive form. The women we saw in the streets were dressed in cheap calicoes from France. They had nothing local about them except the way they twisted their woolly hair into spikes and plastered it with grease. Their jewelry was like all the other jewelry we had seen on the desert. The only passably interesting things for sale in the market were fringed leather pouches and saddle bags, said to be

Tuareg. They had designs burnt upon them, were fairly well made, and when they were mellowed by age were not unattractive.

The abode of the White Sisters was full of light and quietness. We tried to express our enthusiasm and respect for the work of the order.

"We try to teach them," the Sister said, gently smiling. "We give our best."

We bade her farewell, and then we visited those whom she tries to teach. Through a door not unlike the entrance to the convent-school we passed into small dark rooms like caves, with beaten down earth floors, and into a courtyard, some twelve feet square, open to the sky, from which other black caves led. The earth in the courtyard was not bright like the desert but a blackish grey from the dirt of ages. The stench of ages filled the inclosure. A woman so filthy you could not bear to look at her squatted against a wall suckling a child, and another in a black haïk spread down a tattered and dirty rug for us to sit on. It was hard to sit down on it and we gathered our burnouses about us lest a single edge should touch that unspeakable floor. Even so we had a conviction that we could never wear them again until they were washed.

The old woman in the black haïk, who had an almost black face so thin that her nose looked like an eagle's beak, brought a dingy bit of cloth in which the jewelry, gathered from the neighborhood, was wrapped. Her claw-like hands unfolded it on the rug, and before us lay a glistening pile of silver and great chunks of deep-red coral. A youth came and sat on the rug to do the bargaining, during which two young girls also appeared, utterly dirty but smiling, and flopped down carelessly on the objectionable ground. They exhibited their remarkable hair with pride and one of them took off her earrings to offer me. I had to take them in my hand, which was difficult. The bargaining was a slow process, and the moment came when the courtyard was no longer to be borne and we devastated Ramdan by paying too much. He mourned over this all the way home and always thereafter whenever jewelry was mentioned.

Out into the blessed sunshine! The white souk was full of white sunlight and there, in its midst, was another aspect of life on the Sahara, the mehari. Stately the tall camel stood in the sun, towering above men and beasts, an aristocrat, clean-limbed, covered with long, soft hair, not tawny nor purple nor

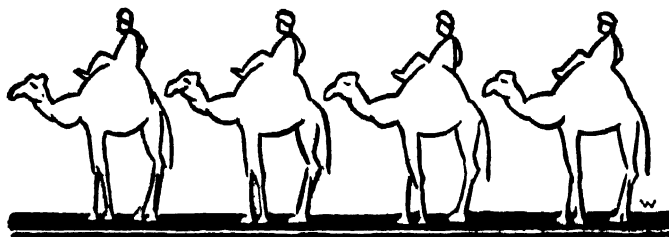
grey, but the color of the trunks of palm trees which hesitates between them all. The little saddle with wooden crosses before and behind was perched on the forward part of its hump. Huge saddle bags covered with designs, embroidered, heavy with cut leather fringe, hung down on either side. A bridle ornamented with brass adorned the patrician, high-held, disdainful head, and the one light rawhide rein from the proud nostril was held by an immaculate-looking Arab, the servant of some rich man. The Arab, all the Arabs, were dwarfed by the superb creature. We assayed, respectfully, to caress it, but it could not notice us at all.

We met another aspect of the mehari as we turned out of the plaza onto the glistening sands of home. A light tan-colored one this time, with a handsome French lieutenant in the inspiriting blue uniform swaying back and forth on the little saddle. He was remarkably handsome, and the combination of his formal uniform and the orders on his breast with his bare feet pressed against the mehari's tan neck like the bare feet of an Arab rider, embodied the romance of France in Africa. We lost our hearts when the Romance greeted us from his proud elevation. During the entire "biggen fête" next day we could not keep our

eyes off his various gorgeousnesses as he ran the mehari at the head of a company of native troops in blue burnouses mounted on swift camels, swarthy Arabs from the sandy desert below Ouargla.

Only five or six French officers were stationed at Ouargla with no soldiers save volunteer native troops, but the tall poles of a wireless station rose behind the main building out on the sand and an aeroplane came in with the mail. We were invited with the greatest cordiality to the fête by the captain, who even presented us to the visiting colonel, "the biggen chief on desert," come all the way from In Salah far down somewhere in the south.

"France owe much to America," was Ramadan's explanation of this awe-inspiring honor.



XIV

WE went to the fête on the mules. They were all cleaned up and the immense red saddles were carefully brushed and our burnouses had been washed. We went betimes; the Arab believes in going early and staying late, nor does he care how long he waits, for he lives on deserts. On the morning of the fête the camp was astir as early as though it were a traveling day, and we reached the assembly place in front of the main military building before eight o'clock. The doorway was decked with flags which fluttered bravely in the light wind, and crossed palm branches ornamented the windows. All Ouargla, that is, all male Ouargla, for not a native woman attended the fête, was similarly minded about the hour and was arriving in a continuous procession across the half mile from the gates of the town, a procession of men and boys in white burnouses and turbans, most of them on foot but some riding asses, and nearly all of them carrying palm branches

in their hands. The palm branch is the emblem of festivity; probably not much different from this looked the procession which entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The centuries merged together as the inhabitants of Ouargla approached the French flags. As they arrived they squatted on the ground or stood about in placid groups, and soon the beating of the tom-tom began, and the skirling of the loud, shrill flutes.

On either side of the massed people two groups of meharis in peaked saddles and brass-trimmed bridles knelt, contentedly chewing their cud. Occasionally an Arab on a wildly prancing white horse circled over the sandy plain for no apparent reason except to shoot off his long gun, or a French officer on an English saddle galloped by purposefully. The Caïd arrived, resplendent in scarlet and gold. All the while the gay little tram, with a flag stuck at each corner of the fluttering canopy, certainly not like a street car in France and most certainly not indigenous, came and went bringing stout Arabs who were prosperous enough to pay for a ride. Among the ever-growing mass of spectators who sat or strolled around the tom-tom and the skirling pipes stood three standard bearers carrying tall poles ending in golden balls,

from which the flags of Islam, heavy with gold fringe and cords and tassels, displayed the crescent.

A light wind whipped the many flags gayly and accented the flowing lines of the burnouses. The air was crisp, almost too cold, and of a dry, flashing clearness impossible to describe. You need words that denote sound and action, bright, vivid, staccato words for the glint of that sunlight on the sand, on the angles of the buildings, on the white garments, on the wide cartridge belts and little daggers of the Tuaregs, on the brass trimmings of the meharis' bridles and the polished peaks of their saddles. You need gayer words than "glancing" and "clashing," dancing words, live, joyful, positive words. The desert was dancing from pure exuberance at a fête of the sun.

By half past ten all the blue burnouses of the French auxiliary were gathered around the kneeling meharis and the Romance of France in Africa dashed into sight. At the same moment the French officers moved away over the sand, the Caïd and his company followed, an inspiring sight, streaming garments and prancing steeds. The Romance made a gesture and the blue burnouses, more than a hundred, leapt upon the peaked saddles

and the meharis arose. A moment of bright, tumultuous heaving, then they lined up, their shadows indigo on the sand, and followed the Caïd with the Romance at their head. Next came the tom-tom and skirling pipe, the flags of Islam and the population of Ouargla in an indiscriminate crowd of men and asses and waving palm branches. Then the second group of meharis, more than a hundred again, bearing "all Arab from desert," big swarthy men in white turbans and burnouses. They rode indiscriminately, too, some of the meharis trying to run and being restrained with the dainty rawhide rein while the white mantles streaming back from the shoulders of the riders displayed their white gonduras and wide brass-trimmed belts and daggers and fringed leather pouches. We closed in among them, part of the procession, Charlotte and Saïd and I on our mules, Ramdan spurring Tambor to a semblance of spirited ferocity, and Embarek and tall Sebehe, Larabie, Bubliker, and Abdulla looking like a prophet of old, following us on foot.

The procession traveled some three or four kilometers over the sand—here and there a small dune, here and there a group of three or four palms—to the most southerly village of the Ouargla group, a struggling town inclos-

ing on three sides a big sandy square. When we turned into the square among "all Arab from desert" the blue burnouses were already standing in a straight line before a wall of the town, an impressive line of tall camels and tall men, statuesque, impregnable. The Romance ran his mehari up and down before it while behind it the roofs of the town, continuous with the wall, were crowded with spectators. Scarlet rugs had been hung over the parapet and flags fluttered from poles set along its top. "All Arab from desert" lined up in the same impressive way at right angles to the blue burnouses, and the inhabitants of Ouargla, the asses, the palm branches, the musicians, and ourselves, found places around the other two sides of the square. The "biggen chief on desert," the captain and the Caïd, flanked by Arabs on horseback, held their state in front of the brightly decorated wall and the impressive blue line.

And then we waited some more.

The two living walls of camel-riders, one blue, the other white, was silent, but a confused sound of voices arose from the spectators who moved and squatted about in their usual manner. Occasionally a horseman dashed into the middle of the square for no reason except to dash, and the Romance was

active. The bright flags streamed from the top of the wall, the sunlight glanced and flashed and clashed and danced.

Then suddenly the white wall broke, the meharis ran, their riders yelled and bent forward, a great swirling of sand filled the square, and the company vanished over the dune which barred the south. "All Arab from desert" were going to meet the French chauffeurs.

We wanted to go with them for the sake of standing on that dune and seeing those cars, little dark specks, come crawling out of the vast brightness of the unknown, but decorum or something forbade it. We waited. We waited for some time, and then a caterpillar tractor came over the top of the orange-colored dune, a small, squat, grey, ominous thing. It descended and another came until there were six, and then for a moment "all Arab from desert" stood on top of the dune against the pale blue depths of the sky. They came over and the procession slowly entered the square, crossing it to the spot where the "biggen chief," the captain and the Caïd held their state. The blue burnouses saluted, the palm branches waved and a great cheer, a massive volume of sound, filled the air.

The chauffeurs, lean men in khaki, left the

cars. There were hand-shakings, greetings, congratulations, perhaps there was speech-making, but we could not hear it. The ominous grey things stood in a line facing the living wall of meharis and blue burnouses. The excited people heaved and shouted around us. We wondered if they knew why they were cheering, if they really rejoiced in this conquest of the Sahara which was not their conquest, if they felt nothing portentous nor ominous in the six grey things. The tractor itself is an ominous object even when it is hitched to a plow, perhaps because of its squat ugliness and its irresistibleness as it plunges over anything, or perhaps because of its inefaceable association with war. Like so many things when you look at their potentialities, it is a beneficent frightfulness.

After an hour the hardy adventurers climbed back into the squat, grey things and slowly left the square for Ouargla. The "biggen chief," the Caïd with his escort, the blue burnouses led by the Romance and "all Arab from desert" followed. The rest of us came along as best we could. Outside the inclosure the freshening wind was lifting the sand. We rode in a white swirl, through dimmed sunshine, encompassed by a crowding throng of men and asses, vague shapes, and

towered over sometimes by lagging meharis. Sand was in our eyes for we had left our goggles at home, we hurried blindly in the wind.

"C'est dommage," Ramdan kept repeating. "It spoil the rices."

But he need not have worried, for when we reached the tent, away from the crowding, running feet, the sand stayed where it belonged and the sun was bright. It was about two o'clock and "the rices" began at two. The men were restless, suppressed restlessness which we cruelly ignored. We cruelly permitted Saïd to cook several courses for luncheon, and cruelly sat on the red carpet, and cruelly munched dates with epicurean deliberation. Embarek held the saddled mules at the tent-door for an hour, as impatient as an Arab can be, but we cruelly announced that we would wait for the wind to stop blowing, and we did. Even so, when we reached the race course about half past four—we made a concession by trotting most of the way, for you can learn to bear a mule's trot with practice—the races had not yet begun.

The race course was out on the desert on the far side of Ouargla where a hill commanded a view of a vast area of packed-down orange sand as smooth as a floor. In the

midst of this expanse, so big that the low dunes beyond were vague in the distance, a circular race course was marked out by stakes with palm branches bound around them. The hill-side was the grand stand. A tent made of the black rugs of the nomads had been erected on top of the hill for the notables who sat on chairs therein. The rest of the spectators sat on the ground, tier after tier down the side of the hill, a white mass picked out with dark faces. We modestly took our places on the sand, but were seen almost at once and invited by the "biggen chief" himself, an honor which left Ramdan almost breathless, to come inside the tent.

Five or six French ladies, the wives of the officers, in high-heeled slippers and summer costumes suitable for races in Paris, sat in the nomad tent, and a few children who might have come from playing in the Bois de Boulogne rolled down and crawled up the sandy hill in the space before the black canopy, which was kept free of squatting spectators by two of the Caïd's officers with leather whips, the usual effective method of policing in Algeria.

We seemed to be the Caïd's guests, for his scarlet gorgeousness rode up and down by the race course, directing and being consulted. All races are full of leisurely intervals, these

were especially so. The course was three kilometers, a mere nothing in the great, flat basin in which it lay, and the riders on the far side were only moving specks. Beyond them sand reached to the vague dunes, sand reached as far on the left to the silver streak of the alkali-covered chott which we had crossed, sand reached as far on the right to a semi-circle of low hills similar to the grand stand hill. It was an impressive race course, so big that it dwarfed the races and the hill of spectators, so big and serene that the excitement of hundreds of men—they were as excited as Arabs can ever be when the long guns were fired—was as insignificant as the snapping of a child's penny firecrackers on the Fourth of July.

The races began with Arabian horses and Tuareg riders in streaming garments and guns slung crosswise behind their shoulders by a strap over the breast as Ramdan carried his. The horses came tearing along with a great show of speed, much action up and down, much high flinging of feet and heads, always reined violently upon their haunches at the finish while the riders shouted and fired volleys from their guns. The spectators responded with shouts. The Arab loves to fire a gun, it is his chief activity when he can get

one and something to put in it. France discourages him from getting one, he has to show cause for having it, so a gun is the most coveted of possessions.

We had some difficulty in knowing which horse won, there was none of that professional precision which usually characterizes races, any more than there was that agonized stretching of necks and bellies along the ground and spending of every ounce of strength. The Arab does not believe in spending the last ounce. He plays in the same leisurely fashion as he works. Prancing, rearing, gun-play, spectacular excitement, constitute "the rices."

A sort of recess or *divertissement* took place between the horse races and the camel races in the form of an obstacle race by boys on asses which jumped over hurdles of palm branches. This was a disorderly proceeding, giving rise to rocking mirth. The crowd seemed to know who won though we did not.

The much-heralded "camel rices" were most orderly. About three hundred meharis participated in three races during each of which they circled the long course several times. Their gait was a running trot, their long legs swinging straight. The riders had their shoulders and abdomens tightly bound with

broad bands to keep themselves from being shaken to pieces by the short backward and forward jerk, Maybrick's swaying adagio performed presto staccato. I wondered about the backs of the Arabs' necks and lost ambition to ride a "rices camel." Every time the meharis passed the grand stand the spectators cheered, but there was no prancing nor cavorting nor gun-play. The running camel, the age-long traverser of endless spaces, runs as monotonously as the pack-camel walks, as easily, as endlessly, he belongs to the desert as much as the slow pack-camel, he indulges in no proud prancing, he is aware of magnitude.

The camels were still running when we left the races after sunset. Many of the spectators were drifting away so we rode in a procession, some of the men running beside us and asking questions which Ramdan translated. They were curious about us and about America, a land which always seems to challenge their imaginations. They wanted to know if we went to "rices" in our country and if they were like these, and they were dumbfounded that the mehari should be strange to us. They left us at the various gates of the town and we rode to our tents in the gathering night.

The dancing was scheduled to begin at seven-thirty, but our men were not restless, the excitement of prancing and gun-fire was what they had hungered for. Racing is like baseball, the national sport. The camp was calm and dinner was elaborate. About nine o'clock the beating of the tom-tom began and Ramdan inquired if we would go over.

We strolled across the starlit sand to the plaza where a great company of burnouses was packed around a fenced inclosure in front of a white wall with a balcony and balustrade above. We were admitted to the inclosure, the entrances of which were guarded by the Caïd's police with long red leather whips. A group of Tuareg girls and women, unveiled, sat in one corner and the lighter-skinned Ouled Nails, some twenty or thirty, squatted in a row at the base of the white wall. Bundles of dried palm leaves lay about. The musicians squatted on the ground beating the tom-tom occasionally. Two acetylene lamps on the wall killed the star-light, but failed to illuminate the inclosure. We climbed up onto the balcony, sole possessors of it, and leaned on the wide stone rail, Ramdan and Saïd guarding us on either side. And we waited.

Presently France appeared at the far end of the balcony, and instantly the inclosure

burst into activity, the mass of turbans crowded upon the frail fence, the red whips cracked. The dried palms were ignited into two fires, real bonfires, blazing extravagances, and the theatre was illuminated. The musicians warmed the tom-toms, the pipes screamed shrilly.

The Tuareg women formed a ring around one of the fires and slowly circled it, shoulder to shoulder, their bodies throbbing rather than swaying to the varying yet monotonous beat of the tom-tom. They kept this up endlessly interrupted only when the men entered the circle to throw more palm branches on the fire which lighted the girls' dark, immobile faces, their red calico dresses and black shawls, and flashed on their silver necklaces and bracelets.

Meanwhile the Ouled Nails, singly or in groups, performed their eternally "just same" dances by the other bonfire. Some of them had beautiful features and their ornaments were of gold instead of silver. The piper, never ceasing his shrill music, danced with them, advancing, receding, leaping around them. The performance went on and on, the spectators pressing silently against the fence, entranced, hypnotized—until a group of men, grotesquely disguised, burst into the in-

closure. They performed some strenuous dances, seemingly not even rhythmical, becoming gradually more and more obscene. A few of the Tuareg girls left their circle to join the Ouled Nails, the rhythms of the tom-toms became more complicated, faster, wilder, the long red whips could no longer restrain the crowd—and then, for no apparent reason except that the palm branches were all consumed, the dance ended. The tom-tom beaters stood up, the pipers ceased skipping and shook the moisture out of their pipes, the women gathered their shawls about them and drifted away in groups, the crowd of men slowly dispersed.

The “biggen fête” was over.

We made our way through the dispersing crowd, out into the silent plain under the immense stars. Our imaginations dwelt upon the track of wheels across the big silence in the south, the first wheel-tracks; two parallel depressions in the sand, still visible where the wind had not yet buried them, two parallel, shining streaks across the stony regions, that would be visible for a long time, signs of what new portent in that ancient loneliness?

XV



OUR route away from Ouargla lay northeastward through sunny sand, a week of quietness, and then through the "biggen dunes" from Tribat to El Oued. At El Oued, though we still had a few days more with the caravan, we would be back on the beaten track. The journey would be over.

Tribat was undiscoverable on any map, but we were firmly assured of its existence.

"Nomad town. No people there."

"Why not?"

"They go on desert for the summer. They go now. No strange-men see Tribat. Nobody go there. All biggen dune."

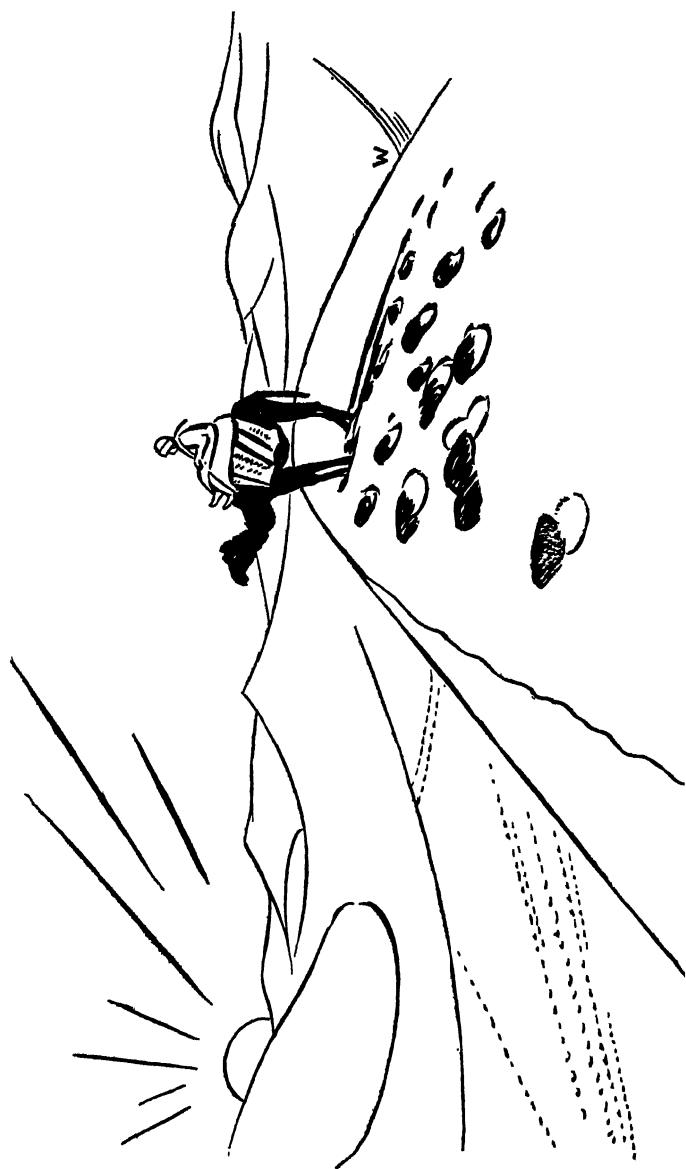
And it was so. We approached Tribat through soft sand becoming ever more rolling until we were among hills, peaked summits, long curving crests, sharp declivities that the mules and camels slid down pursued by orange-colored cascades. The brush which covers the sandy levels gradually vanished, only an occasional green bush sparkled in some curve of the yielding tracklessness.

As the sun went down the palms of Tribat came in sight, rising among the rose-orange dunes. It was a sparsely green island, not massively verdant like the island of Ouargla but frugal like the lives of the nomads. Small groups of palms stood far off, beautiful upright trunks holding green plumes high, floating them on air that was like a pure liquid, colorless, tasteless, yet palpable. The green plumes floated with the magicalness of mirage, as magically as Lalea had floated.

From basins where we lost them we would climb to high summits and see them again floating in front of the bright disk of the sun. The sun lay on the earth for a moment like a ball that might roll along the horizon, and then sank leaving the sky tinged with faint apple-green and yellow. All the dunes turned blue, the crests light blue, the hollows between them indigo, and Tribat, when we came to the town at last in a shallow basin, was blue.

The nomad village was unwallled, spread out on the desert, unprotected save by immensity. Instead of the flat roofs we had seen hitherto each house was domed as though a mass of white koubas had been built touching each other. They looked like beehives clustered around a larger beehive, the dome of the mosque. Two or three palms rose out of the cluster, very tall above the crouching, blue-white houses around whose walls and doorways the blue sand had drifted. Tribat was stark on the desert like a nomad encampment, and the scattered gardens, groups of ten or fifteen trees showing above the dunes, were not green rugs when we came to them, but drifted sand from which the tall palms grew like the palms in the dunes at Lalea. We went into the nearest garden, an almost circular hollow among the soft, bare hills, and pitched our tents.

A nomad town sounds like an anomaly and it is, for when a people builds itself houses and raises dates, even in gardens full of sand, it is rooted a little in the soil. The inhabitants of Tribat were not rooted very deeply. The village had an ephemeral look, the dunes might roll over upon it. It suggested nothing of the enduring permanence of walled Guer-rara and Melika on their hills, nor even of



Ouargla in its sandy plain. The nomads raised nothing but dates, no vegetables nor wheat grew under the palms. For a few weeks in the early spring they watered them, then they gathered the harvest, what there was of it, in October. That was agriculture.

It could not support life and already, in the beginning of April, the inhabitants had left Tribat to take their animals onto the desert, moving from place to place all Summer, seeking pasturage and living in their black tents. Only three or four men and a few women, holding their black shawls partly over their faces, were left in town. The marabout had remained in his mosque and he sent us thick, sweet coffee on a brass tray.

Ramdan had asked him for a guide through the "biggen dune" to El Oued.

"He say he have good man. He say he come from El Oued two weeks ago. He know a way. He say plenty water."

We surely needed a guide. Shortly after sunrise the next morning—we had to travel without delay because of the scarcity of pasture for the camels though we should have liked to delay at Tribat—we plunged into a bewildering labyrinth of immense sand-hills, each looking so like the other that to find a way among them and over them to a given point

in the level-seeming horizon was a miracle. It seemed more a miracle than Bubeker's navigation through the green sea to Lalea because here the way was indirect, winding through valleys where the horizon was lost, winding around the sides of hills, curving along crests, turning back on itself, avoiding too steep ascents and descents—"he find good way for camel, camel tire."

From the tops of the ridges the heaving sea of sand met the sky in a vast ring, in the basins the pure lines of the nearby orange-colored dunes cut into the pale blue. In the early mornings and late afternoons the summits of the dunes became rosy orange and the valleys full of blue, pale like the sky or like the shadows on white clothes in sunlight. The ring of the horizon seemed vastly distant, the barren sand, unstable, soft, flowing, delicately tinted, seemed even more spacious, more untraversable than the bright, interminable plains.

All the days were absolutely still. The silence was like the silence of an untroubled ocean. The rolling dunes were like arrested waves; a rosy sea spreading to the sky, arrested but somehow not static, alive and curiously flowing, for all the while the heart-beat of the silence was a rhythm to be felt. It beat

up from the shining dunes as it had beat up through Maybrick's feet on the shining plain by Lalea. It was living underneath, other rhythms sprang from it, music you need no ears to hear.

The days were so still that no white foam of sand curled ever so lightly over the crests of the dunes, and those are still days indeed, for the gentlest breeze will raise a white froth on the sharp edges of the hills. Foam, it is like, on the crests of waves. How it must boil up when the strong wind blows! What a white fury when the arrested ocean begins to flow! It flows visibly then. The striving of the wind moves the dunes around, actually changing the ancient desert which nevertheless remains "just same." The striving wind is a magnificent rhythm, it is carried in the brasses, a crash of trumpets.

But in the silence of those days on the way to El Oued the sand flowed together in the wakes of the "ships of the desert" without a ripple of sound. The Sahara is always like the sea, a level sea or a tossing sea. If you had never heard of a "sea of sand" you would say it, and you would say "the camel is a ship."

"Like sea!" Almost every day for six weeks Ramdan had said it of some aspect of the view. Even on the massif he would rein

in Tambor and pointing at the hard meeting of the earth and sky say "like sea." The massif was like a cold, grey, smooth sea, coldly sharp at the horizon. The empty sea and the empty Sahara are as though nature were expressing the same thing in different materials, as though she had but few forms, as though perhaps she might be reduced to one form of which desolation is an aspect.

I have dwelt a great deal on this aspect. I have celebrated the delight of spreading a red carpet on empty sand and of swaying monotonously on a camel. It lays me open to criticism, I know it does, as much as building an altar to the sun. It is rather like that. The delight of the desolate places is inexplicable. Perhaps it lies in their simplicity; the delight of going home and shutting the door for an interval against the stirring, complicated, engrossing, beautiful, distracting rhythms of the world. Nothing distracts you; not even a forest, hardly even a flower. For a little while you are in the presence of the great silence which then manages to assure you of its shining and its life.

"I am alive. I shine. I contain all things."

I cannot even describe the delight itself—delight is too pale a word, but its paleness is a recommendation, you can color it as you will

—any more than I can remember the assurances that I had at Lalea. When you try to focus a lens on delight it ceases, as the emotion beauty arouses ceases the instant you turn on yourself to inquire: "What is this?"

The aspect of spacious quietness remained with us all through the last days of the journey, the Sahara was as she should be. We followed the nomad guide, very lean, very dark-skinned, bearded, dressed all in ragged white. He walked through the trackless sameness with the slow, even steps of an habitual traveler over great distances, assured steps, assurance in every line of his swinging burnous. Hour after hour he would walk on as though he need never stop. Occasionally he did stop on the summit of some high dune to seek out "best way for camel." Then Ramdan, his gun slung crosswise behind his shoulders, would catch up and there would be a consultation, the two figures brightly silhouetted on the sky as we toiled up the hillside in the footprint trail.

The "nomad-man" always found "best way," and miraculously found the well. It was in a large, shallow basin where bushes dotted the sand and cast long, pale shadows. The "nomad-man" walked to the center and stopped, bending over the ground with a ges-

ture suggesting prayer. Slowly we gathered around him and found a hole in the ground without coping or signpost or landmark, a nomad well like the well at Dinar. The weary camels knelt down almost without protest and soon were wandering among the bushes. Soon the two tents were raised, the circle of baggage arranged and Saïd's fire lighted.

Our three camel-drivers, dressed exactly like the veritable "nomad-man" though not ragged, drew water in a sheepskin bucket as they had drawn it at Dinar. There were golden nimbuses around them from the last rays of the sun, and every time they stooped to lower the bucket and stood to draw it up their garments fell in beautiful, swiftly evanescent lines. Many and many a time now had we rested on the red carpet and watched them, and always their strong movements, their strong bare feet so firm on the sand, the swirling flow of their garments, harmonized absolutely with the immobile desert spreading around them, fitted it, belonged to it. We contemplated movement as an expression of motionlessness.

A great anomaly this, yet sound expresses silence. Embarek's wooden flute and the traveling song of Kabylie and the chants of Sebehe rising around the couscous fire be-

longed to the desert. The sounds floating out into the night were not lost, they were gathered up into it.

THE END

